Wild West Stories

AND COMPLETE

NOW 10¢

NOVEL

APRIL

magazine

GUNFIGHTER'S GLORY RANGE

by JAMES DORN

TRIGGER PARDNERS
by
RUSS TALBERT

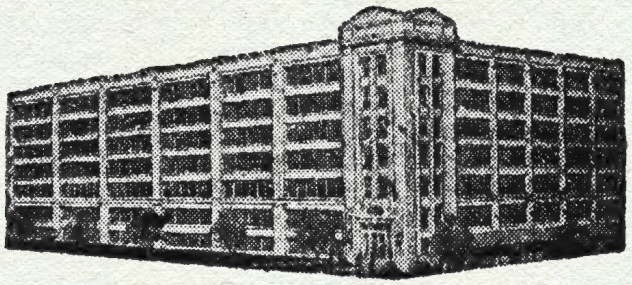
●

FOOTHILL WELCOME FOR FIGHTING LAWMEN
by
JAMES LASSITER

●

PLUS OTHER THRILLING SHORT STORIES

A Million Dollar Company WANTS MEN for COFFEE ROUTES



Making Regular Weekly Calls Pays Up To $60.00 In a Week

Over 350 more men will be given the opportunity at once—by this million dollar, old established company—to run their own fine-paying Coffee Routes right in their home localities. No experience required. Excellent chance to make good money at once—up to $60 in a week for full time and up to $6.50 in a day just for part time.

PERMANENT ROUTES PAY BIG CASH

You simply run a Coffee Route in your locality. Everybody uses Coffee, Teas, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, other foods and home necessities almost every day. Make regular calls on your customers, keep them supplied with the things they need—all nationally famous, high quality products. You handle all the money and pocket a big part of every dollar you take in. You don't divide up with anyone.

MAKE MONEY FAST

Look in the box at the right. See the big money reported by others. These exceptional earnings show *your* big possibilities. I have an even better proposition to offer you now. Why, even housewives have reported fine big earnings just for a couple of hours each day! I'll help you start with good profits at once. No money risk. Be your own boss, free and independent, with the backing of an old established, million dollar company. My remarkable money making Plan has brought quick success to scores of others. Why shouldn't it do as much for you?

FREE— WITHOUT OBLIGATION

Don't send me a cent. Just rush me your name and address on the Free Offer Coupon below. I'll send you all the facts FREE. Then you can decide for yourself if the money making possibilities look good to you. There is no charge for this information, and you will not be obligated to go ahead unless you want to. Send me your name and address now and by this time next week you can be on your way to success! Don't waste a minute. Mail the coupon or a penny postcard AT ONCE!

E. J. MILLS, President
9287 Monmouth Ave.
Cincinnati, Ohio

FORD CARS GIVEN AS A BONUS

To encourage giving regular service to their customers, I give brand-new Ford Cars as a bonus to producers over and above their own cash earnings. Not a contest or raffle, but an extra reward for producing. Car is not needed at the start, but is a great help as business grows.

POSITIVE PROOF BIG EARNING POSSIBILITIES

Can you make money with a Coffee Route? Yes! If space permitted I could print scores of sworn reports of exceptionally fine earnings. Here are just a few:

Earnings Reported for One Week

F. J. Mosher,	Wyo.	$ 60.00
Clare C. Wellman,	N. J.	96.00
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These sworn reports of exceptional earnings show your wonderful possibilities! Why not give yourself the chance? FIND OUT! Get the FREE FACTS.

SEND NO MONEY
Just Rush Coupon Today!

FREE FACTS COUPON

E. J. Mills,
9287 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Without placing me under any obligation, please send me FREE your Coffee Route Plan, showing how I can make up to $60.00 in a week. Also tell me about your bonus offer of brand-new Ford Cars.

Name .....

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Wild West Stories AND COMPLETE NOVEL MAGAZINE

10c April, 1939

★ ★ COMPLETE ACTION NOVEL ★ ★ Page

Gunfighter's Glory Range.....by James Dorn 10

Like buzzards to a carrion-prize came fugitive gunslammers to that hell-born Texas bordertown. But Ranger Shelby Camp, with two saddlepards to side him, Colt-blazed his trail to the owlhoot rendezvous—to learn that it was a lawman's first stop on his lonely ride to eternal range!

★ ★ A THRILLING NOVELETTE ★ ★

Boothill Welcome for a Fighting Lawman.....by James Lassiter 94

Owlhoot hellions called Shoutin' Shelley Raines a tinhorn penny-ante buscadero —but they forgot he was a badge-toter, who played his cards close to his chest, and his hands close to his guns!

★ ★ FOUR EXCITING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

Trigger Pardners.....by Russ Talbert 64

Tuolumme Tom coveted that five-thousand-dollar reward they were offering for the kill-crazy desert-rat hiding in Death Valley—even though the blood-bounty fugitive was his old saddle-pard!

Twenty-Four Hours to Leave Town.....by Ken Jason 75

A man needs more than guns and guts when the hangnoose is his only trail-side, and boothill grave his only destiny!

Killer's Gold.....by Lon Taylor 85

Poke-lust made Tony the Blood blast the life out of that grizzled old prospector —but Tony didn't know that a man can ride back from death's corral to demand vengeance from a boothill grave!

Guns Up.....by Larry Colt 108

Steel-Eye Dervish had the quickest draw in all Idaho—but homesteader Claude Harland knew that two gun-hands are better than one!

Number 137

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LOOK FOR THE RED CIRCLE ON THE COVER!

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It Shows How I Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. Smith, President
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Established 1914

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I will prove I can train you at home in your spare time to be a RADIO EXPERT. I will send you my first lesson FREE. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand—how practical I make learning Radio at home. Men without Radio or electrical knowledge become Radio Experts, earn more money than ever as a result of my Training.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to $6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Here's Proof

Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M——— Furniture Co., for their four stores."—JAMES E. RYAN, 1535 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.

$40 a Month in Spare Time

"I have a very good spare time trade. At times it is more than I can handle. I make on an average of $40 per month profit, and that is spare time, working week ends and some evenings."—IRA BIVANS, 216½ E. 3rd St., Rock Falls, Ill.

Earnings Tripled by N. R. I. Training

"I have been doing nicely, thanks to N. R. I. Training. My present earnings are about three times what they were before I took the Course. I consider N. R. I. Training the finest in the world."—BERNARD COSTA, 201 Kent St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Why Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over $50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra In Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to our regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning.

How You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loud-speaker installations. This 50-50 method of training—with printed instructions and working with Radio parts and circuits—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you with a professional instrument for full time jobs after graduation.

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I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

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Act Today. Mail the coupon now for sample lesson and 64-page book. They're free to any fellow over 16 years old. They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my training in Radio and Television; show you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 9AK1
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON **FREE**

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9AK1
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send the sample lesson and your book which tells about the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

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30x4.50-21	2.45	1.15
28x4.75-19	2.45	1.25
29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.65	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.65	1.35
6.25-17	2.90	1.25
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
32x6.00-21	3.65	1.65
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-18	3.75	1.45

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Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$0.95
31x4	2.95	1.25
32x4	2.95	1.25
32x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	3.25	1.35
32x4½	3.25	1.45

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95
32x6	7.95	3.25
32x6	7.95	3.25
36x8	9.95	4.45

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
6.50-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
ALL OTHER SIZES		

Size	Tires	Tubes
32x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.45	1.45
30x6	3.65	1.65
33x6	3.75	1.75
35x5	3.95	1.75
24x7	$10.95	$4.65
28x7	10.95	4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$6.95	$3.75
8.25-20	8.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65
9.75-20	13.95	6.45

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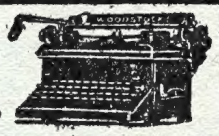

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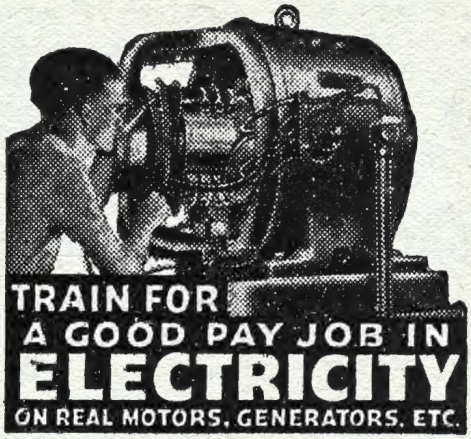

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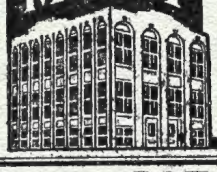

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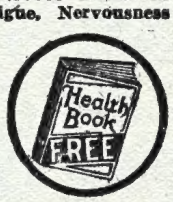

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Gunfighter's Glory

Horses and men went down under the methodical deadliness of that hail of shredding lead

SHELBY CAMP knew that Freeman City was a hard, wild little town. Every Ranger knew that and, even if he were no longer first lieutenant of Y Company, his Ranger memories were only two months old. So he understood a good deal about Freeman County. He looked curiously up and down Freeman Street's dusty length, at hitch-racks, houses, stores, saloons; at the two-story courthouse across the street-end making "Court-House Square."

But, if he found the collection of false-fronted buildings quite usual, a typical West Texas county-seat, he told himself thoughtfully that the population was unique—because it was the hardest-looking collection of hard cases he had ever set expert blue eyes upon.

HELL-SPAWNED HATE AND RANGER-COURAGE IN A BIG BOOK-LENGTH GUN-WAR NOVEL!

Range

By JAMES DORN

Author of "Man-breaker's Trail to Hell," "Gun Legion of Cowman Salvation," "Gunfighter's Glory Range," etc.

They called the Rio Amarillo a lawman's first stop on his lonely ride to eternal range, and the country attracted fugitive gunslammers like buzzards to a carrion-prize . . . And when outlaw-buster Shelby Camp fogged in, with two saddle-pards to side him, he was to play out a game where hot lead was King, and trail-born Death held the stakes!

He looked for Marcus Button's store, turning in the silver-mounted, full-stamped Myres saddle there before the White Elephant Saloon. He addressed a dark youth leaning against a post of the wooden awning, asking directions.

"Fo' doors down, this side the street," the citizen replied. Yellow-tinged dark eyes roved over the stranger, from wide-brimmed, high-crowned, obviously expensive white Stetson, down the five-seven of Shelby Camp's slender height. Those eyes seemed to ticket, item by costly item; soft scarlet neckerchief, blue flannel shirt, stamped waist-belt about gunless middle, fawn-colored

breeches, and alligator-hide boots with gold-mounted spurs.

"But Marcus Button ain't in town, right now," the dark youth added, when his survey had included General Forrest's chestnut perfection and the expensiveness of the saddle. "Y' better light an' take y' first constitutional, friend. They call me Ollie Newell an' I'm about to liquor."

"An' they call you tinhorn, too, I'll bet a dime," said Shelby Camp. But to himself. His smooth, too-boyish face was pleasantly blank of any sign of his thoughts. He nodded.

"I'll do that thing, Newell. Mighty kind of you. You're not the Official Welcomin' Committee to F r e e m a n City?" he grinned, swinging down and hitching General Forrest to the rack. He ducked under. Ollie Newell grinned in return.

"Nah. Lots o' folks that float into this Rio Amarillo country, they wouldn't *sabe* a welcomin' committee. They —*might* 'low 'twas another kind o' committee an' smoke things up. But when I see a feller and I like his looks, hell! I buy him a drink. What might y' call y'self, stranger?"

"Shelby Camp'll do. I'm used to that. From Austin—which is quite a ride from the Rio Amarillo."

THEY pushed inside the White Elephant. From behind a blank face, Shelby studied the crowded saloon. There were at the least sixty men in there. And he was willing to bet anyone any amount that if he had a copy of the *List of Fugitives from Justice,* he could find seventy-five per cent of these drinkers described in that priceless volume. The Rio Amarillo attracted fugitive criminals as carrion attracts buzzards.

"Next'n's mine," he said, when they had drunk once. Ollie Newell nodded. Furtively, he was looking about him. Shelby saw how the dark eyes roved searchingly, though he made no sign.

A man appeared from among the crowd at the other end of the bar. He came, a tall, negligent-seeming figure, up toward the door. He was the handsomest man Shelby had ever laid eyes upon—blond as a Viking, a couple of inches over six feet in height, looking to weigh close to two hundred beautifully proportioned, muscular pounds. Shelby saw how drinkers seemed to hunt opportunity to catch his large, steady blue eyes.

He came up abreast of Shelby and Ollie Newell and paused. He wore a dark blue, gorgeously embroidered jacket of *charro*-style, over a crimson silk shirt. His trousers were of the same color and worn over shining kid boots. Little golden bells tinkled on his heavy, Mexican spurs as he walked. As he stopped—to look at them, Shelby thought—his white hands were hovering over his gold-an-silver plated double actions. The pearl handles were carved in the semblance of crouching panthers with ruby eyes.

But he looked past Shelby—if giving him one quick, comprehensive glance. Next to Shelby at the bar was one man who did *not* seek the attention of this big, good-looking dandy. It was a rancher of past middle age, a gaunt, lantern-jawed and shabby man. He hunched his stooping shoulders, this one. He pulled his lank-haired head down between them, turtle-wise. And only from under graying brows did he look up into the mirror of the White Elephant.

"Hello, Al Ansley!" said the big man. "How does it happen you left the peace and comfort of the Rio Tenohaw, to come visit all your old friends in Freeman City, Al—not that we aren't all glad to see you, of course . . ."

His lazy drawl make it mockery. Al Ansley understood it for that. From

the corner of his very watchful eye, Shelby saw how the tanned skin under the battered old hat suddenly twinkled with tiny beads of perspiration. He wondered what lay behind this. He was handicapped by ignorance of the town's, the country's "politics." This might be the preliminary to a killing. Ansley's bearing, for all that a well-worn Colt hung at his side, could bear out that theory. Certainly he looked scared.

"Going back today?" the big man went on, still with that lazy caricature of friendliness in his deep voice. "Are? I suppose you take the F-Anchor road, as usual . . ."

Ansley's sallow face whitened at that. Shelby stood negligently with elbow on bar-edge, expression wholly casual. But he was ready for flashing movement, if all this did presage a shooting. Ansley's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. The sound of his swallowing was like a frog's croak. And then he whirled, face still pale, furiously convulsed—with fear, rather than anger, it seemed to Shelby. He slid into a slight crouch.

Out of its old holster came the worn Colt. And it came fast. The hammer was back. Pointblank, it was trained on the big man. *He* was drawing—filling both hands. And the speed of that draw was something to watch!

"Dam' yo' soul!" Ansley screamed. "Yuh pushed me too far—"

His Colt and the big man's two made a terrific roar. Shelby had gone sideway like a cat jumping. He was six feet out of the line of fire when his boot-heels struck the worn floor. He was facing the two principals of the scene.

ANSLEY'S head and gun-hand both had sunk downward a little as with weariness. He made a grumbling noise in his throat. He began to lift his head and the pistol at the same moment. The big man fired twice again: right-hand, left-hand. Ansley's gun fell to the floor. He came to a squatting position, fell forward and straightened in an uncouth sprawl. Over him the big man, paper-white of face now, stood with two Colts moving a little up and down, hammers back, ready for another shot. There was a ragged tear in the inseam of his left jumper-sleeve.

Slowly, there was a surge of men toward him. He flung a quick glance behind him, at them. They stopped short. Shelby watched everything with calm eye. Something was behind this.

A man brushed past him, a squat man, hardly more than five feet tall, but very wide. He looked at Ansley, then turned a little to look at the other man. There was a large nickeled shield on his shirt-breast.

"He drew first," said the killer. "I guess everybody saw that. I wonder what got into Al . . . He had a perfect right to try to kill me, if he felt that way, but why would he *want* to kill me? Just as I was talking to him friendly enough . . ."

"Dam'f I know," the sheriff grunted indifferently. "But we better git Clabe Ireland on the job an' have the inquest over. Ollie!" he looked at Ollie Newell. "Run down to the justice's office, will ye? Tell Judge Ireland we got a inquest for him."

OLLIE NEWELL nodded and went out. The drinkers crowded up around the killer, now. They called him "Gathrie," or "Rome." Shelby figured that his name was Rome Gathrie, since those who seemed to be most intimate with him, easiest with him, used the name Rome. He looked speculatively at Shelby, who had moved back to the bar. Shelby met his eyes without emotion.

"You were closest to him," said

Gathrie. "What do you think about it? You were in a position to see him move."

"He pulled first," Shelby nodded. Underbreath, he added:

"Plain scared into it, too!"

Ollie Newell reappeared quickly, proving that he had found the bald, fattish justice who trailed him nearer than the courthouse. Judge Ireland was manifestly expert at holding inquests. He examined Shelby and Ollie Newell and a couple of other witnesses. Looking with interest at the bottles and glasses on the bar, he gave it as his verdict that Ansley had come to his death at the hands of Rome Gathrie, while attempting to kill Gathrie. Self-defense!

"That's that!" Ollie Newell informed Shelby, after the luckless 2A owner had been removed. Speedier than Austin?"

Two men came up to Ollie. They asked about the poker game he was going to start. He looked sidelong at Shelby Camp.

"Well, I'd like to play some," he said artfully. "But—we got enough to make up a game? Y'ever play poker?" he asked Shelby, as if moved by a chance thought.

"I've played quite a bit, but maybe not so fast as you-all play," Shelby nodded. He understood that these men had come in answer to Ollie's signal. "I've got a little business at Marcus Button's, though. Tell you: you-all go ahead. If I can get back, I will. If I can't, there's nothin' lost."

Ollie Newell looked vaguely disappointed. Inwardly, Shelby grinned. He was by way of being an authority on the Genus Tinhorn and its practices. But solemnly he went out and down four doors to Button's store. Button was not yet back, his clerk said. So Shelby, perched comfortably upon the end of a counter, smoked and meditated. It was a hard case country. There was no doubt about that. That killing had been some sort of murder. He was certain of it. He had seen too much of crime not to have a sort of instinct about it.

"The minute Rome Gathrie asked Ansley if he'd take the F-Anchor road home, Ansley went wild. It was like a signal. . . . An' the only thing I can see is that Gathrie was as much as tellin' Ansley he was goin' to be killed on the road home."

He looked up abruptly at the grizzled clerk:

"Huh? I'm Shelby Camp. Mr. Button's an old friend."

"From the 3C!" cried the clerk. "Well, sir, you don't look a bit more like yo' pa—I ain't set eyes on Long Tom Camp in—lawsy! it's twenty year, I reckon. I never would've knowed you for a Camp. You must favor after yo' ma. But from what Marcus an' me hear tell about yo' doin's in the Rangers I reckon *inside* you favor after Long Tom plenty!"

"Who's Rome Gathrie?" Shelby grunted, after a bit.

The clerk hesitated for a moment.

"Well, since I know who you are—him an' Kent Freeman, they jist run Freeman County—the whole Rio Amarillo country. High an' bloody-handed. Gathrie has to stand in with Freeman, o' course. But by the livin' Judas, it's got so that Kent Freeman kind o' has to stand in with Rome Gathrie! He let him come in; let him build up a tough outfit under the Diamond-G iron; an' now he's got to stand it. But I reckon it's Gail Freeman keeps 'em from squabblin'—Kent's gal. Rome's goin' to marry her next month. Dirty shame."

"What's the matter? Isn't she off the Freeman bolt?"

"ON the surface, yeh. But Gail . . . well, my notion is, she looks moe'n she sees. Gail's tender-hearted an'

all—spoiled, by bein' queen o' the county. She don't have a notion about how Kent Freeman an' Rome Gathrie keep control o' things. Nor how Rome makes the money he squanders. I tell you, Shelby Camp, we've asked a dozen times for Rangers to come in an' clean up things. An' if somethin' ain't done, to jog them folks at Austin into givin' us Rangers, I don't know what the end'll be."

"Ollie Newell one of Rome Gathrie's hired hands?" Shelby asked absently. "Tinhorn, *no es verdad?*"

"Yeh, to both questions. He's one o' Rome's killers. An' he'd like to be a tinhorn. But he's right clumsy."

"Got five-six-seven hundreds I can write an IOU for? I have a notion there's a poker-game goin' on that I'd like to sit in for a while.... Ollie Newell an' some friends."

"You can have whatever's in the place," the grizzled clerk nodded, after a long, hard stare. "An' since you know Ollie's crooked as a corkscrew—"

"I reckon I'll make out," Shelby said softly. "Yeh."

CHAPTER II

A Tinhorn Cashes

THEY were not playing, Ollie Newell and his two friends, when Shelby came back, whistling, into the White Elephant. Ollie was standing beside Rome Gathrie. The tall Diamond-G man was talking with slow earnestness to the tinhorn. His tone was audible to Shelby, coming closer, if not his words.

"Goin' to play?" Ollie cried, grinning, at sight of Shelby. "Say, Rome, this is an Austin boy. Shelby Camp, Camp, meet the He-Wolf o' the Rio Amarillo country—Rome Gathrie o' the Diamond-G. Fastest gun-slinger an' saltiest—"

"You talk much too much, Ollie," Gathrie drawled. Though his full mouth curved slightly in a smile, as when he had goaded Ansley, Ollie Newell was nevertheless stricken with sudden silence.

"Austin?" Shelby repeated Gathrie's question. "Why, I was raised on the 3C, three hundred miles from this. Couple years back they sent me down to Austin to see the world. Now, I'm homeward-bound. *You're* not Texas!" he finished slowly.

"California!" Gathrie said curtly. "See you again."

Shelby, Ollie, one Free Utley called owner of the U-Bar, with three obvious saloon-loafers, sat down in the rear of the barroom. Ollie suggested dispensing with chips. After a half dozen hands, Shelby found himself two hundred in the hole. He had won only a couple of small pots and the betting ran high. But he was more interested in sizing the competition than in winning, just them. Interested, too, in checking the faces of the cards against the clumsily done marks on their backs.

Already, he found himself reading the backs at least as easily as Ollie Newell or Free Utley could do. It was obvious that Newell and Utley were the crooked dealers. The other players were evidently using money handed to them. They did not count. They had been enlisted to help trim him. Several times, Shelby caught them looking for and receiving signals from Ollie.

He looked up from his cards, something like an hour later, to see Marcus Button coming at his bow-legged waddle down the saloon. Button stopped, grinning, beside Shelby's chair.

"Howdy, son. Durr told me you come lookin' for me. How's tricks? Headin' for the 3C?"

Shelby smiled and nodded. He was

dealing. Button leaned against the wall, watching. His heavy-chinned red face was expressionless as Shelby's own. Shelby's small hands moved awkwardly as he shuffled the cards. Certainly, the last thing in the world his shuffling would make a watcher think of was a card-shark — one who could shuffle those cards into precisely the relative positions he had decided upon beforehand. And — one who *was* shuffling them to arrange the dealing of six predetermined hands.

Ollie Newell, sitting on Shelby's right, looked at Shelby's fumbling hands, smiled slightly and, as he faced Free Utley at the other end of the table, one eyelid drooped a little.

Ollie had not yet cut the cards on Shelby's deal. Shelby laid the made-deck down for a cut. Ollie hesitated this time, then cut them. Shelby picked up the two halves of the deck and when he began the deal, he had replaced them as they were before cutting.

He dealt a jack of diamonds to the bum on his left and a jack of hearts to Free Utley. The next two players received trash cards out of the hands prepared for them. To Ollie he dealt the ace of diamonds and to himself the ten of spades. He dealt with some fumbling and slipping.

"Got enough money, Shelby?" Button asked, yawning.

"Got better'n four hundred left," Shelby Camp figured, stopping the deal to look at his heap of money. "I don't know what the future holds, but if I *do* get a hand, gentlemen, beware! I'm going to go clean through the ridgepole. An' it's time my luck was changin'. Leavin' Austin ought to do somethin' for it. Will you be banker for me, Mr. Button, if I should need help? I'll give you an order on us for the amount."

"Sky's the limit," Marcus Button nodded.

THE loafer on Shelby's left opened for five dollars on a pair of jacks, as Shelby knew. Free stayed. The bum on Free's left raised five dollars. He had the king of hearts, diamonds and clubs. The next man looked sidelong at Ollie, who nodded the barest trifle. That man stayed for the raise. Ollie with the aces of diamonds, hearts and clubs, raised ten dollars. Shelby, masking the backs of his cards without seeming to try to, looked down at them with a small frown, whistling. He shrugged and looked at Ollie, whose yellow-tinged eyes were twinkling.

"Por dios!" Shelby exploded. "You-all certainly try to give a stranger cold feet. Costs me twenty dollars to reach out for one card. . . . Well, sir! I'm goin' to pay it. An' if what I draw is what I'm lookin' for, everybody move out o' the second floor, for I'm comin' through!"

When they had drawn around to the dealer, the man on Shelby's left had not to exceed two pairs—his original jacks and something lower. Free Utley now held a queen-high straight flush in hearts. The loafer on Utley's left, who had raised the opening bet on three kings, possibly had a full house. His neighbor had a straight, jack-high. To Ollie's aces, Shelby had added a pair of queens. From the bottom of the deck, Shelby dealt himself the jack of spades, letting Newell and Free Utley see its back.

The opener checked. Free Utley grinned. He pushed out two hundred dollars. The loafer on his left shoved in his whole pile of money to make it three-fifty. The next man saw that. Ollie, staring intently at the backs of Free Utley's cards, blinked rapidly. He raised three-fifty. Shelby looked with absent face around the table. His hands were shaking. He licked his lips, playing with his money. He counted it, then turned to Button.

"I want—let's see, I got four hundred. I want sixteen hundred more—if I never see the back o' my neck! I told you my luck was due for a change."

Button scribbled on a sheet from his notebook and tossed the IOU into the pot. Ollie Newell nodded. So did Free Utley. Utley called to a bartender as the opener threw in his hand. He muttered in the bartender's ear. The white-aproned one nodded and went up the bar, not inside, but outside. Shelby saw him stop before Rome Gathrie. Gathrie turned to look at the poker-tables. Then he nodded and the bartender went behind the bar. He came back with money. He handed it to Utley.

"A' right!" Free Utley grinned at Shelby. "An' up five hundred, if I never see the back o' *my* neck!" he added.

Around to Shelby, the others dropped out. Ollie was craning his neck, trying to see Shelby's cards. Shelby masked them. He stared, hands still trembling, at Free Utley.

"A'right. This is one time I'm goin' to play my hunch. Drop another IOU in there, will you, Mr. Button? For an even two thousand. I'll just tilt *you* about fifteen hundred, Mr. Utley. If you win this, you can lay off a couple o' days."

Utley called again to the bartender. But this time, when he spoke in Rome Gathrie's ear, Gathrie shook his head.

"Boss says nothin' doin'," the bartender reported.

Utley scowled. He stared at his hand. Then he looked at Shelby. His hands, too, were trembling.

"Fella, I got a place on the other side the Amarillo—the U-Bar. It's worth mebbe twice that fifteen hundred. Anyhow, Mr. Button'll tell y' she's worth the fifteen hundred. Will y' take a bill o' sale to it, with ever' head o' stock on it, to cover that raise o' y's?"

"Yeh," Marcus Button grunted. "Only fair, Shelby."

HE looked around the saloon, called to a gangling, frock-coated country-lawyer of a man. Upton Kinchell came over to the table. Button explained what was wanted.

"Ought to be legal," he said dryly. "With the district attorney drawin' the transfer papers."

Kinchell stood waiting, when upon another table he had written out the document and it lay in the pot. There was a thick crowd, now, about the table. Rome Gathrie came loafing back, to stand staring.

"A'right," Free Utley said hoarsely. "I called y'!"

Shelby faced his cards—ace, king, queen, jack, ten of spades. Utley's mouth dropped open. His greenish eyes bulged. He dropped his hand, that queen-high straight flush in hearts. But he said nothing as Shelby scooped in the pot. It was Ollie Newell who sprang to his feet with furious face.

"Somethin' dam' funny about that deal!" he snarled.

His hand dropped to pistol-butt. Shelby came to his feet like a cat. He smashed Newell in the face as he caught the pistol-butt. He jerked it from Ollie Newell's holster as Ollie went backward to the floor.

The crowd surged away. Rome Gathrie took a calm step backward. Newell was not knocked out. The torrid right had landed only glancingly. Shelby, leaning over the table to look at him, saw his hand go under his vest. It came out again with a short gun. Then, with Newell's own Colt, Shelby drove two bullets into the tinhorn as Newell's hide-out bellowed. Ollie Newell fell backward from the sitting posture he had reached.

"'S matter?" Shelby scowled, straightening to look around. "He got

a grudge against royal flushes?"

" 'T is funny," Free Utley said slowly. "Me havin' a straight flush an' *you* with a royal—on y' own deal. . . ."

"Why not?" Shelby returned flippantly. "Man can't win on his own deal, he'd have a time winnin' on somebody else's!"

Marcus Button had moved in beside him. Button grunted to Shelby to get the winnings from the table. Shelby poked bills and papers into the blouse of his shirt. Button caught the eye of Upton Kinchell—with some small difficulty. Kinchell seemed, somehow, to be sorry that he was there. Button would not let him look away.

"Ollie Newell," Button said heavily, "has been overdue at a killin' for some time. You heard any complaints, Upton? About funny tricks with cards? No-o-o? Lots have. Anyhow, you saw the whole business, just then. I was watchin' it—an' you."

Kinchell looked almost pathetically at Rome Gathrie. He made a froglike noise in his throat. Gathrie watched him very steadily, no change on his face. The little sheriff, Donald Magee, popped into the crowd. He looked fiercely around.

"Newell tried to shoot this boy," Button explained before anyone else could speak. "He pulled a gun on Shelby when the boy had won consid'able money off Free Utley. You'd almost thought, to see Ollie, that somethin' had gone astray with his notions o' how poker-games ought to turn out. Shelby snatched the hogleg off'n him an' smacked him in the jaw. Ollie hit the floor an' got out a stingy gun an' Shelby got him as he was tryin' to collect Shelby. Right, Upton?"

The district attorney looked miserably at his long feet. The sheriff stared almost incredulously at him. Button's voice was like a bark, when he repeated the question. Dumbly, then, Upton Kinchell nodded his shaggy head.

"Uh—yeh—uh—that's how I saw it," he agreed.

"Clabe Ireland!" Button called loudly. "Clabe Ireland!"

AS unwillingly as Upton Kinchell had testified, the justice waddled back from his place among the drinkers at the bar. For the first time, then, Rome Gathrie moved and spoke.

"You certainly are anxious to get this all settled in a hurry," he suggested to Button.

"What's that to you?" Button countered rudely. His frosty, belligerent eyes glared into the taller man's.

"It might just conceivably be a good deal." A pulse began to hammer in Rome Gathrie's smooth, thick throat, "If this fellow hasn't anything to conceal, why the great hurry?"

Button merely snorted and turned his back on Gathrie. Shelby, watching everything, did not take his eyes from the big man. He saw, then, the evidences of barely-controlled rage; saw how the big, strong, white hands clenched as if anxious to close around the crouching panthers that were his gun-butts.

"But he's got his back to you," Shelby said in a low voice, to Gathrie. "Better prod him into drawin' on you."

Gathrie's head jerked. He stared at Shelby's slight smile. But before he could notice this evidence that his maneuver with Al Ansley had been noted and understood, Judge Ireland had been swept forward by the dominant Mr. Button. The second inquest of the evening was on.

It was quickly finished. As quickly as that over Ansley. Upton Kinchell testified, the answers dragged from him. The verdict was the same as that of the other inquest. Shelby found himself walking out with Marcus Button. But midway the length of the barroom,

Rome Gathrie stepped out before them.

"What road are you taking out of town?" he asked pleasantly.

"My name's not Ansley," Shelby told him. Then he looked straight into the tall man's eyes. He laughed at Gathrie.

CHAPTER III

KNIVES BY NIGHT

"ANSLEY . . ." Marcus Button said slowly, when the door of the store had closed behind them. "He wasn't much, but what little the' was to him, it was the right kind. He happened onto Rome Gathrie an' Free Utley, Ollie Newell an' ten-twelve more o' that gang, with a big bunch o' hawses that come off half the outfits north o' the Amarillo. He was seen, too. He thought it all over an' he decided to come in to tell Judge Ebert what he'd seen. He done it, and without a doubt Upton Kinchell went to Rome Gathrie with word. Then—"

Shelby told what he had seen of the Ansley killing. Marcus Button nodded somberly at the end. He watched while Shelby drew his poker-winnings from his shirt. Shelby pushed over the two IOU'S. Button's stumpy finger came out, to poke the sheet that transferred to Shelby Camp full title to the U-Bar ranch that had been Free Utley's.

"Why don't you stick an' run that?" he grunted.

"*That!* Why, it wouldn't make a feedlot on the 3C an' you know it, Mr. Button. A poverty-stricken one-calf outfit. Likely every head o' stuff on it has a blotted brand. An' bushwhackers to squat on top o' every hogback an' comb my hair the minute I stepped outdoors. No, thank you! I don't own any part o' Freeman County's troubles an' all I want is to sell the U-Bar the minute I can find a buyer. I'm homeward bound with my hair in a braid. Who'd buy such an outfit as the U-Bar?"

"Well . . . over at Jericho is Quincy Helms. He'd buy a red-hot stove an' carry it out with him, if the price was right. Queer coot, Quincy. Half jackleg lawyer an' half land-agent—an' all trader. Honest accordin' to his lights *but* he can get along with both sides in this country, which is a lot. You better offer the U-Bar to Quincy an' sell for a thousand."

It was growing dusk when they went out upon the street, heading for the eating house in which the storekeeper regularly ate. It was a narrow-fronted place adjoining the rambling, two-story frame hotel. A Chinaman kept it and the food was remarkably good for cowtown cooking.

After supper they sat on the wide porch of the hotel. Shelby listened with interest to the storekeeper-freighter's tale of outrages done in the Rio Amarillo country; of the intolerable condition in which honest folk now found themselves.

"Get after Yates Putnam again," he advised. "He's the youngest Adjutant General yet an' a dam' good man. Put the business strong to him; an' it wouldn't do a bit o' harm to kind o' drop a word about the hard cases laughin' at the notion o' Rangers cleanin' up this country. Yates is touchier'n a sore-back bronc' about the Rangers. You try that line. With the state o' business you describe—sheriff an' county attorney an' district attorney an' justices o' the peace, all takin' orders from the ring o' thieves—Rangers are your only hope. I believe I could take just two I know, 'Booger' Tobin an' 'Happy' Overton, an' put the fear o' God into these imitation bad men. Three such as those two—hell! they'd accomplish more than callin' out the militia could do!"

THEY had a night-cap, around nine o'clock in the Bank Saloon of Pat Leary. Leary was a huge red-faced and solemn man. He shook hands very gravely with Shelby Camp; very courteously, too. But out of the corner of a small, shrewd green eye, he looked questioningly at Shelby's sponsor.

"Oh, Shelby's not so young an' purty as he looks," Button grinned, understanding. "He's the boy that cleaned up the Dumas-Holkbrook feud in Casteen County last year. They do say he knows one end o' his hogleg from the other. I been tryin' to tell him into stickin' in Freeman an' loanin' honest folks a hand. We got more trouble than the folks in Casteen had."

They went back to the store. There were two bedrooms behind it. Marcus Button made Shelby free of one and waddled off to the other. Shelby undressed thoughtfully. His money was in the big safe. His saddle, with belt-gun and holster in a pocket, was in the store's store-room, under lock and key. He pulled off his shirt and unlaced the shoulder holster with its second gun. Purely from habit, he set this shorter .44 along his chest when he lay down. He fell asleep almost instantly.

When something waked him he lay with eyes closed, body moveless, listening. His room was dark. Through slitted lids he could tell that. His fingers closed about the butt of the hide-out Colt. There was a scraping sound in the next room. He wondered if something had waked Marcus Button and if Button's moving about had been the cause of his waking. He got off the cot soundlessly. In bare feet he moved toward the door. A line of light showed under it—a light suddenly turned on. There was the pad-pad of footsteps outside the door.

Shelby hesitated. The light vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. The padding feet moved away as if going into the store. Except that there seemed to be more than one set, Shelby found nothing to keep him there, out of his bed. He put out a hand to the rattly old knob. Gently, he turned it. With infinite pains and slowness, recalling the squeaky hinges, he drew the door open to thrust his head out.

He could see nothing in this little cross-passage that ran across the building between store and living quarters. He elbowed along one side-wall to the store-building's back door. He went out and took two steps to the door into the store. There was a partition, six feet high, that boxed in Marcus Button's office. Here was his desk and the big iron safe. Behind that partition, one looking through the front windows could not see, even if the store were lighted.

It was not. But the office was lit. Shelby moved into the store and toward the muttering voices. Then someone said clearly in Spanish that he would give "him" the knife. . . .

"Not yet!" a voice answered sharply, quickly, in Spanish.

Shelby understood, though Marcus Button did not, having no Spanish. He moved softly toward the office.

"First, he opens the safe," this second voice explained.

"Hey, Louis!" a voice called in stage-whisper, from the doorway through which Shelby had come into the store. "He ain't *at* the hotel! Where you reckon he's holed up?"

There was nothing to do but take a chance, since he was between the two parts of this party. He turned toward the newcomer and fired, then jumped to the open side of the office. There was Marcus Button, stubborn-faced, with old-fashioned nightshirt flapping over bowed, hairy legs. A lamp was on a box. A stocky Mexican had a knife in one hand, a pistol in the other, behind Button. One of those loafers who had sat in the poker game with Shelby,

Newell and Free Utley, were beside the Mexican. But a man Shelby had never seen before, a half-breed for looks, held a Colt-muzzle against Button's body. His thin, sharp face was turned sideway as Shelby appeared; it was furiously convulsed, lips ferally drawn from white teeth.

SO much Shelby saw in a flashing glance. The Mexican leaped at Marcus Button with knife jumping up. Shelby killed him with a shot that caught him virtually in air. Button flung himself backward and sideway off of the Colt-muzzle. The saloon-bum's face was frozen desperation. He looked scared to death. He tried to get the pistol out of his waistband where he had thrust it. He fell backward against the safe as a bullet struck him. He was sliding to the floor when the half-breed opened up on Shelby. From the floor a Colt bellowed. The half-breed took a convulsive step forward. Shelby slammed a shot at him but he was gone already. Marcus Button rose grimly with smoke coming in a thin wisp from the muzzle of his pistol.

"Who was the other one — that yelled?" he grunted.

Shelby ran back toward the doorway into the hall. He found nobody. He went on past the door of Button's room and around the elbow toward the door in the building's backwall. Across its threshold lay a man. He scratched a match from the man's own pocket. Another of the Newellites who had sat to give bulk to that poker game. Shelby shook his head.

"Shot through the heart an' still can run like a rabbit for twenty feet an' more!"

It was midnight. But there were men to come crowding in when Marcus Button opened the front door of the store and fired his pistol a couple of times in the air. The sheriff came from his room at the hotel downstreet. A couple of deputies were before him. Rome Gathrie loafed in, looking as if he had just dressed with much care for his appearance. Free Utley, too.

Button told the sheriff of waking with a light in his eyes and a gun in his ribs; of knocking over a box in the hope of waking and warning Shelby. Shelby told his part. Rome Gathrie looked thoughtfully at him:

"You speak Spanish, do you?" he drawled.

"Young fella," Shelby flung down the gauntlet boldly, openly, "you'd be surprised at how I speak Spanish. You see," he finished, as if answering a question, "my name's not Ansley, so you don't bother me a bit. Got it?"

"Well," Sheriff Magee shrugged. "Nothin' to do till tomorrow, I reckon. They cut a piece out o' the back door to git in. If they 'lowed this young feller was with you, Button, likely 'twas their notion they'd find him an' the money he won from Utley an' Newell, here. We'll hold the inquest tomorrow an' settle things up. Take these fellas out, now."

Shelby watched Rome Gathrie, with sardonic amusement that he made no effort at all to hide. He grinned widely when Gathrie looked steadily, ominously, at him.

"You can try proddin' me into drawin' any time you want to," he told the big man. "You got somethin' comin' to you. First Newell falls down with his marked cards. Now this bunch— "

Gathrie nodded and went out. A few of the men closest to them stared from his broad, retreating back to Shelby's grin. They looked furtively puzzled.

"You think 'twas me that bunch hunted?" Shelby asked Button, when they were once more alone in the store. "Or was it both of us?"

"Hard to say. Gathrie an' me have been at outs for a year. I wouldn't do

a nickel's worth o' credit business with him an' I wouldn't be bluffed. An' I don't get along with Kent Freeman. He knows well enough what I think about him an' his ways. Mebee somebody figgered the two things together made it worthwhile to hit a lick. I'm certainly goin' to write a letter to Austin tomorrow an' it'll be a hot'n', too!"

CHAPTER IV

GAIL FREEMAN

WHAT with the inquest, Shelby was ten o'clock in starting on the twenty-mile ride to Jericho to find the shrewd Quincy Helms. But the white road through the chaparral wastes was a pleasant road under the spring sunshine. And, the black horse borrowed from Marcus Button, to let General Forrest's lameness cure with idleness, rapped out the miles at a steady foxtrot comfortable as a rocking chair.

He rode his own saddle, with Winchester under his leg in saddle-scabbard. A long-barreled .44 Colt sagged butt-front on left hip, the only plain thing about his outfit, with smooth walnut stock and blued metal. He rode alertly at first but after five miles decided that nobody chose to follow him out of Freeman City. After ten miles he almost forgot the possibility.

The black was walking up a long, gradual incline toward the boulder-studded crest of a low hill, when from behind the top there sounded the dull fast thudding of a racing horse's hoofs. Automatically Shelby pulled in. His hand slipped down and half-drew the Winchester. But when a tall bay with slender rider popped over the hilltop, he stared only a moment before letting the carbine drop back into the scabbard.

For the rider's wide, white hat went off. Long hair blew backward. It was a girl, and on a runaway horse. Shelby thought. He gathered up his reins, frowning a little. To stop that bay—

The girl's hand jerked. Shelby glared at her, with a sound of a flat report. Again it came, and again. She was shooting at *him!*

Two horsemen bobbed over the hill-crest behind her. They were like mechanical figures, let loose by her shots. Just over the hill, they pulled in short. Their horses fairly sat down to slide with a rattle of small rocks, and stop. The girl looked at them behind her. She whirled the tall bay and sent it off the road, out into the brush of the rough slope.

One of the riders lifted the Winchester he carried across his arm. Shelby snatched out his own. But there was a drumming of fire from the first man and the other was getting out his long gun from the scabbard.

As Shelby flung up his carbine, the black groaned and dropped between his legs. He kicked clear of the stirrups and dropped. Lead was singing everywhere over and about him. He pushed his carbine forward, aimed flashingly and then, as fast as he could work trigger and lever, he sprayed .44's at them until his gun was empty.

One turned his horse. He was swaying in the saddle as he galloped back toward the hilltop. Shelby was reloading from his belt. The other man whirled after the girl. She was going, the bay jumping as much as galloping across the chaparral. Shelby shoved the carbine across his dead horse and opened up on the man. At that instant the bay vanished in the brush as if falling into a pit. Shelby swore and hammered the man's vicinity. This one, too, decided to run away. He turned left.

For the second time, Shelby reloaded.

Then he trotted up the road to the hilltop. He could see both men, and both were leaving there. The wounded one kept to the road, swaying so to right and left that it seemed impossible that he could keep the saddle for another jump of the horse. The other was going through the brush. Apparently he had not been wounded at all.

SURE of this, Shelby dogtrotted down-slope and through the chaparral toward the spot where the bay had vanished. And the horse appeared, riderless, head visible above the brush. The girl lay beyond the bay. She was moveless, a small and pitiful heap in man's shirt, but of heavy cream silk, scarlet pants like Rome Gathrie's, half-boots of fine tan kid and gold spurs that also reminded Shelby of Gathrie. Under her gauntleted right hand—Shelby's mouth set grimly—was a pearl-handled, silver-plated self-cocker.

He bent beside her. Her eyes were closed, dark lashes down on smooth face that matched the silk of her shirt for color and smoothness. A wave of hair was across one cheek. He slipped an arm under her and as her head turned, he saw the lump on her forehead, already a faint blue, where she had come down on a small stone. Her heart was beating.

He picked her up and looked at the bay, which had nothing worse than skinned knees. He nodded slowly at sight of the brand on the horse's cheek —F-Anchor. . . .

So this was the girl whom Rome Gathrie was to marry—Gail Freeman. . . . And she had been shooting at him, who should be a perfect stranger to her. She and her F-Anchor hard cases. As he put her across the saddle, he thought of what Durr, Button's clerk, had said.

"Just a spoiled kid," Shelby said sardonically. "But a sweet thing, once you know her. Yeh!"

He held her and guided the limping bay up the slope to the road. Here he let her down again and got the pint flask of Jordon from his own saddle-pockets. He held her, with his arm under her shoulders and pried her teeth apart. Grimly, then, he let a mouthful of the whiskey run between her lips. She made a strangling noise. The lashes lifted. Her eyes were not dark, as he had expected. They were deepest, clearest gray. She was seventeen or eighteen, of course. But when she stared up blankly, she seemed no more than ten.

"Where are—they?" she demanded, trying to sit up.

"Take it easy. You got a right hard rap," he grunted coldly. "They figured they had plenty o' powders—to leave. I think I snagged one a couple of times. The other one, he took his foot in his hand an' emigrated. Now, if you're able to talk, what was it all about? You an' you bunch shootin' at me?"

"I—" She shook her head and stopped. She sat up, to put a hand to the lump on her head and groan. Then she came to her feet. She reached for the bay's reins. Shelby stepped between, shaking his head.

"Not—so—fast! How far's it to Jericho?"

"Eight miles, about. Now, if you'll kindly let me have my horse's reins—*my* horse's—I'm going—"

"Don't talk so much!" he exploded. "You're goin' to do ex-act-ly what you're told. That's only half your horse. The other half I'm going to ride to Jericho, since your thugs downed my nag. I'll show the F-Anchor a thing or two about lettin' children that ought to be home sewin' doll rags loose with a popgun, to kill horses. I'll collect for that horse if I have to take hide enough off F-Anchor mules to *make* a horse."

She threw back her dusky head and hooted at him. But there was a hyster-

ical note about the laughing. He snapped his fingers under her upturned nose.

"I—I can't help it!" she gasped. "The idea of you—*you*—a little pilgrim from somewhere, taking hide from the F-Anchor! And because your indulgent parents have let you loose with a man-sized gun, instead of a wooden pistol—"

SHELBY moved to uncinch his saddle from the dead black. He carried the saddle into the brush and hid it safely. He came back at a run which was just fast enough to snatch the reins from her hand. She was picked up and, kicking and striking at him, deposited in the saddle. He put the reins over the bay's neck and with touch of hand to cantle, landed behind her. The bay was lacking the spirit to buck. Shelby relaxed. With arms about the slim waist, he held and guided the horse.

"This is no pleasure to me, I want you to understand," he told her. "I like good little girls that do their embroidery nice an' say 'yes, sir', an' 'no, sir' to their elders. That's me, you know. O' course, you haven't got any manners—"

"You'll learn some manners," she told him, between her teeth. "Plenty! The first F-Anchor cowboy I meet will be instructed to give you a chapping. If we happen to meet a certain other person—"

"An' then the big bad wolf jumped out an' said 'Boo!' to Little Red Riding Hood. I met your 'certain other person' yesterday, in Freeman City. I was standin' at the bar when he murdered Al Ansley."

"Ansley! Al Ansley? You're lying. Rome wouldn't touch him. Ansley's no gunman. He's just a one-cow rancher one jump ahead of the wolf. Rome would be ashamed—"

"Ye-eh? Well, Ansley saw Rome Gathrie an' Free Utley an' a bunch with a lot o' stolen horses, so he jogged into town to tell Judge Ebert about it. Upton Kinchell run to Rome with the word. It was up to Rome, then, to rub out the witness. So, while I was standin' beside Ansley at the bar—"

She listened, stiffly, to a dramatic recountal of the scene. But at the end, she cried out furiously. He was a liar! Gathrie hadn't killed Ansley. But if he had he was justified.

"Ansley's wife an' kids, too," Shelby said as if thinking aloud. "Goin' to be tough on 'em."

"He—he oughtn't to have pulled a gun on Rome," she gasped. So Ansley had left a widow and children. "A man with five children, the oldest only twelve, has no business—"

—"Mixing into thieves' business," Shelby finished for her evenly. But he was looking, perforce, past the smooth cheek. He saw the working of jaw-muscles; the twitch of her slim, smooth neck as she swallowed. Imperceptibly, he shook his head. He thought of her, for a moment as Durr had pictured her—a spoiled youngster, looking at life in this country without really seeing it.

It was no wonder that she was spoiled. But for the grim common-sense of Long Tom Camp, Shelby Camp himself might have been the sort of unbearable pup he had seen more than once. Heir to a cattle-empire numbering employees by the several dozens and containing three towns, each larger than Freeman City, but for the iron hand and shrewd head of his father, who had insisted that *his* son must be top-hand of the huge ranch, Shelby might have been as warped of outlook as this pretty child.

She was pretty. There was no disputing it. He looked critically at her; at the slim roundness of her and the smooth, willful face with its scarlet mouth and wide eyes was in his mind

as well as before his eyes. Suddenly, he thought of Rome Gathrie. He took a deep breath and caught his teeth in underlip. A wave of hatred for that big, too-handsome killer and boss-thief rose to shake him physically. He had never hated a man in his life as now he hated Rome Gathrie.

"Where are you going from Jericho?" she asked suddenly. Her voice shook as if she had been crying silently.

"Back to Freeman. I'm goin' to Jericho because I have got the U-Bar, now."

"U-Bar? Free Utley's place?"

SHE turned in the saddle and he saw the wetness of eye-corners and long, dark lashes. She *had* been crying! But now she forgot that. She was staring at him incredulously.

"Won it from Free in a friendly li'l poker game," he told her airily. "Free an' Ollie Newell, they 'lowed they knew a thing or two about cards. Well, boys will be boys, an' experience you don't pay for often isn't worth much."

"Do you mean to run the U-Bar?"

Shelby found her tone an odd mixture. He was not at all certain that his interpretation of it was the right one. But he looked humorously at her:

"Pórque no? Why not?" he demanded. "If I own it?"

"I don't know why Free Utley let you win it," she said thoughtfully. "Because, if you won it, he must have intended it. But about running it: you would last about—" she snapped small fingers expressively "—that long. This is a grown man's country. And you're just the kind to get in trouble."

"Oh, in that case I wouldn't think o' sellin' out," he said belligerently. It came from him without thought. Certainly, he had not intended to say any such thing. But now that it was out—"I wouldn't sell for double what it's worth. This Rio Amarillo country may beat me, but it'll never bluff *this* cowboy!"

CHAPTER V

Ratler's Warning

JERICHO. . . . Shelby looked it over thoughtfully. It required hardly more than one glance, for it was Freeman City all over again—or any of a dozen other cowtowns he had known. Merely smaller than the county seat and lacking Courthouse Square. There was a two-story frame building with *Rooms and Meals* upon its peeling false front. That was over on the right at the end of town they entered.

"Will you let me down, now? At the hotel?" Gail Freeman asked Shelby. But Shelby found her meekness suspiciously like mockery. He looked at her thoughtfully.

"I have got to have a horse," he said. "From the F-Anchor, o' course. . . . Sure! You can get off at the hotel. I'm not kidnappin' you. In fact I'll buy you a dinner."

"Thanks but—"

"No buts about it. I—well I'll tell you at dinner."

He rode over to the hotel-porch and swung down. She tried to evade his uplifted hands but he caught her and for a moment held her staring up into her face. And unaccountably she turned very red. He let her down.

"I—I want to tell you—those weren't F-Anchor men" she said rapidly. "They were chasing me. So when you jumped up ahead I thought you were helping them an—"

"Shoo! I figured that out an hour ago," Shelby grinned. "So here's your popgun back an'—any special reason why we can't be good friends? Besides your snippety disposition?"

"My snippety disposition! I like that! If I had a disposition like yours I—well I wouldn't have to do anything about it. Someone would kill me, I know."

She turned to the door of the hotel, calling for "Mrs. Vinnie." A little man with huge, walrus-like mustaches and sad, brown, hound-dog eyes, appeared slowly and wearily. He introduced himself to Shelby as Vinnie Jarvis.

"My wife runs the place. But she ain't here. She—she's—" he looked sidelong at the girl and hesitated "—down the street. Come on in. I reckon the's plenty left from dinner to make yuh-all a meal. I'll put the hawse in the corral."

They sat down alone in the dining room and a shining black face appeared scowlingly in the doorway leading to the kitchen.

"Folks cain't make up the' min's about whin to eat," a growling voice complained. "All hours, all times, no git-finish' *to* cookin' in a cowtown hotel."

"Come on in, Cupola," Gail Freeman called to the negro. "You know you like to feed people who like your cooking. I've brought you a new customer. We're both hungry as wolves just now. But don't count too much on his trade, for too long. . . ."

"Yeh? You feel that way about it?" Shelby grinned at her, understanding perfectly "Don't count on that! You an' Cupola are due to see heaps an' heaps o' me. You'll get so used to me you couldn't bear to be without me. An'—you in particular."

For the second time within ten minutes she grew very red. She made a scornful, sniffing sound. Cupola came waddling in, short, pot-bellied, the flap-flap of enormous shoes mingling with his growling complaints. He unloaded a tray before them.

"It *ought* to be good!" cried Shelby, looking from the inky cow-camp coffee to the shining black face.

"Ought to be good," Cupola muttered. A slow grin came over the wise, black face. "Gen'l'man say it ought to be good. Boss! It *are* good. I done it myself."

Gail and Shelby ate and quarreled amiably.

SHELBY left her at the table presently and went out to hunt for the weary Mr. Jarvis. That gentleman looked up at Shelby from his post in a rocker, then sidelong at the door.

"She still in the dinin' room? I never wanted to spoil her dinner. The Ansley funeral is for two o'clock an' Mis' Vinnie is runnin' it. I reckon yuh know about Al Ansley bein' killed by Rome Gathrie, since yuh come from Freeman City."

"Saw it done. My name's Camp, Shelby Camp, an'—"

Weariness fled from Vinnie Jarvis' face and eyes and body. He sat bolt-upright in his rocker, both feet coming down from the porch-rail to the floor. The real man looked out at Shelby.

"I got a brother in Casteen County. Lieutenant—"

"No more!" Shelby stopped him. "I've been a private citizen for two months. I'm homeward-bound—"

"Hell!" Vinnie Jarvis said disgustedly. "An' me thinkin' 'twas the Rangers, at last."

"But I want a telegram sent," Shelby went on slowly. He looked down the shabby, dusty street. "To the Adjutant General. Can you get me a tight-mouthed man to take it to the railroad? An' I need a horse. Couple fellas downed mine eight miles back. An' somebody to ride out for my saddle that's cached there. . . ."

"Yuh can have anything on the place, any ol' time. I'll git a man that'll pack yo' telegram an' bring back the answer

an' forgit he done it. Yuh—yuh aim to ask about Rangers?"

Shelby nodded. Vinnie Jarvis vanished inside. Gail Freeman came out. She looked curiously at Shelby. She shook her head.

"You certainly are a boy-wonder. I haven't seen Vinnie go that fast since the time when he was sheriff and four drunken cowboys got on the roof of the Acme Saloon, yonder, and cross-fired the street. What did you say to him?"

"Sit down," he grunted. "You know they're buryin' Al Ansley this afternoon? That's where Mrs. Vinnie is."

"I—I ought to go—and yet—"

"It'll remind her o' Rome Gathrie," he nodded pitilessly.

Vinnie Jarvis reappeared. He had a tablet and pencil. He handed them to Shelby, who put the tablet on the porch rail and began to write. Gail paid no attention. She was staring down the street, face very white, mouth compressed.

"You have had many complaints about conditions in Rio Amarillo country," Shelby wrote his old friend, Yates Putnam. "You have replied to requests for Rangers with statement that lack of men and troubles elsewhere prevented your sending adequate force. From personal observation I can state that conditions are worse here today than when I arrived in Casteen County. Something should be done. Hard characters express utmost contempt for authority and for possibility of Rangers cleaning up country. If you will arrange for special commission for me and assign me Corporal Tobin and Private Overton I will do my best to create new sentiment toward Rangers in this vicinity."

He signed it and handed it to Vinnie Jarvis, who went through it laboriously. Under the walrus-mustaches the tight mouth twitched. Faintly, Vinnie Jarvis the ex-sheriff nodded.

"That ought to settle up the business," he said.

"I've got to see Mrs. Ansley," Gail burst out, when Vinnie Jarvis had gone. "I want to do something for her. I've known her since I was born. Al worked for us a while."

"Better wait till the funeral's over," Shelby counseled. He reached across to put a hand over hers. She was very much like a child he thought. And another thought came: a few such incidents as this, touching her personally, and Gail Freeman was going to *see* as well as look when she regarded conditions in this region dominated by her father and Gathrie.

SHE moved to hold his hand tightly—and naturally. And from behind them a drawling voice sounded.

"Gail, honey, I didn't know you were in Jericho."

She jumped. Shelby did not move. He continued to stare out over the quiet stretch of street. Gail came to her feet and turned to face Rome Gathrie. Shelby watched from the corner of an eye. A muscle in his cheek twitched. He was certain that never before had the big killer seen her in such a mood.

"I want to talk to you, Rome—about two things. Come down here and listen."

They moved to the end of the porch. Shelby continued to sit comfortably, but to him came the intense staccato of the girl's voice. A word or two drifted to him, occasionally. He heard a name. He was sure it was "Glenn Yoakum"—spoken by Gail in a furious tone. Rome Gathrie's deeper voice did not carry so well. But as she repeated what she had said, the name "Glenn Yoakum," Gathrie's voice lifted a little.

"It must have been a mistake," he told her earnestly. "Why, honey! It *must* have been. Glenn wouldn't do a thing like that. For several reasons—all quite good."

"And then—Al Ansley!" she jumped subjects quite abruptly, voice shaky, high-pitched. "You—"

He had a regretful expression, then. Shelby turned his head a trifle until he could see both of them without seeming to stare. She was rigid, glaring up at Rome. He talked with only tone, inflection, audible. She flung away impatiently. She turned her back on him and stood looking toward where the funeral must be preparing, down the street. Her hands were gripping the porch-rail. When Gathrie moved to put arms about her, she whirled and pushed him away.

She came quickly back to Shelby and dropped again into her chair. He smiled at her. Again he moved a hand, to cover hers. And she let him do it. Shelby, looking sidelong, saw the fury in Rome Gathrie's blue eyes; the slow uprising of blood in Gathrie's clean-shaven, handsome face.

"Gail!" said Gathrie, very slowly, his voice thick and soft. "Run inside, will you, for a little while. Camp and I have something to talk over. Important business. . . ."

"If you don't mind," Shelby nodded, eyes dancing.

She looked curiously at him, frowning a little. He made a small head-motion. She got up, but stood with hand on the back of the rocker. She looked steadily at Rome. She went slowly toward the hotel-door. Even there, she stopped, to look at the two of them once more. Gathrie watched her. Shelby watched him, still grinning slightly, hand close to his sagging Colt.

"Now," Gathrie said shortly, when she was inside. "You've meddled in local affairs quite—a—good—deal, in a very short time. Why I trouble to let you slip out with a whole skin, I'm damned if I know. But here's your chance: you go get a horse, right now, and you climb aboard him. You leave this country in a cloud of dust. That's your last chance and I'll watch to see you take it!"

"I couldn't think o' goin' till after the funeral," Shelby objected, lazily. "Beats all how this spring weather gets a man. But, as I was sayin', I have to stay for the funeral. I promised I would."

"The funeral is no concern of yours. You do as I say."

"No concern o' mine!" cried Shelby. "Why, I'm goin' to arrange it! What funeral do you think I'm talkin' about? Ansley's? Listen here. I knew the minute I looked at you, with those bull-fighter panties o' yours an' all the kid-cowboy regalia, that you had been playin' around in a short-grass country till you thought you amounted to somethin'. But you're more plain kid-simple than I thought. I'm not talkin' about the Ansley murder at all. I'm talkin' about another funeral en-tire-ly. *Your funeral!* That I promised *myself* to arrange an' see!"

HE came like a cat to his feet, hand on Colt-butt. The movement caught Rome Gathrie off-guard. His hands were loose at his sides. Shelby stood with feet a little apart, head thrust forward, eyes blazing through slitted lids. He had an itch to pull the gun and fill that big thief's body with lead. He controlled himself only with tremendous effort.

"You givin' warnin's to a man! You figured the Ansley murder all out—an' *then* he all but got you. Gunfighter? You? You wouldn't make a bump on a gunfighter's finger-end. California, huh? Well, some good men have come out o' California, but before an' after you! I don't hand out warnin's. But I'll hand you an invitation.

"You come out in the street with me. We'll stand back to back an' walk off twenty steps, pull an' shoot. Now's

your chance to show what color your back is. Come on!"

"Sho' sounds eemin-ent-ly fair, to me," Vinnie Jarvis beamed, from the hotel-door. "I'll give a word, if yuh want."

"I do what I do in my own way," Gathrie snarled. He turned. At the steps he halted: "That warning still stands."

CHAPTER VI

BACK-SHOOTERS

FOR two hours, Shelby sat with Vinnie Jarvis on the porch. He heard the tale of the last election but one, when Kent Freeman had thrown his weight and influence to Donald Magee and secured his election as sheriff, and the defeat of Vinnie Jarvis. He heard many other things—heard of rustling of cattle, of horse-stealing, all on a wholesale scale. Of complaints filed in the district attorney's office and the disappearance of the complaining men. Of witnesses dead beside lonely trails. Of seemingly natural killings in Jericho and Freeman City which always worked to the financial or legal advantage of Freeman and Gathrie.

"I'm goin' down an' wander around a little," Shelby said presently, some time after half-past three. "That messenger had to ride sixty miles to the railroad to send the telegram. That means that I can't hear at the earliest before day after tomorrow, from Austin. An' means that if everything is done the way I asked, Tobin an' Overton won't be in for a couple days after that. . . . See you at dinner-time, Mr. Jarvis."

He went past the stores and saloons and houses on the single main street, glancing in alertly. He reached the one hardware - furnishing - coffin establishment. Inside, he saw a red-faced man, taking off a shiny black coat with what seemed a gasp of relief. And he saw Gail Freeman, standing beside a tall, stooping woman in black clothes. Children were sitting stiffly in chairs along the wall. Other women, like the stooped, forlorn figure wearing their obvious best, stood a little way from the two, but watching closely.

"I ask' ye!" the stooped woman blazed at Gail. "I ask' ye the plain question. Don't quibble, Gail Freeman. Are ye still aimin' to marry that murderer? If ye are, git out o' my sight!" Her shrill voice raised in anger.

"He's not a murderer," Gail cried desperately. "That's what I've been trying to tell you, Mrs. Ansley. He explained—"

"*He* explained it?" Mrs. Ansley cried in high, shrill voice.

"He couldn't understand why Al would try to kill him," Gail persisted. "He was standing there, talking to him friendly—"

"Git! Ye don't sound like ye believe that y'self. Him an' his lyin'. He murdered Al because Al went to Judge Ebert to tell about the horse-stealin' he'd seen. Murdered him! As good a man as ever lived. An' left me with a run-down ranch nobody'd take for no price. An' me with five young'n's to feed. . . ."

The strained voice broke hysterically. Mrs. Ansley whirled away and a large red-faced, efficient-looking woman moved to put an arm about her—and to glare disapprovingly over her shoulder at the white-faced girl.

"Run along, Gail. All your talkin' ain't goin' to make black into no shade o' white. This country knows what Rome Gathrie is—liar, bushwhackin' murderer, cow-thief, renegade from

some'r's. An' when you shut your two good eyes an' git ready to hook up with him, you're puttin' yourself on that side. You better go before worse is said."

Gail turned and came hurriedly out. Shelby stepped aside as she crossed the threshold. She saw him and stopped. She was blinking rapidly. He took a half-step toward her. She flung up a hand to halt him:

"Don't ever speak to me again! I never want to set eyes on you again. I hate the sight of you!" she flared.

HE watched her go, almost running, up the sidewalk in the direction of the hotel.

Two men came out of a saloon-door. One was Rome Gathrie. The other was a lank, slope-shouldered man in rusty broadcloth coat. He had a long, lantern-jawed face with no hair upon it save the "paint brush" beard on the chin. Neither looked ahead to where Shelby watched. They seemed intent on their earnest conversation.

"Just as you say, Rome," the stranger nodded fawningly. "I didn't think of buying it, anyway." He looked up side-long at the big man. "It is too hard to keep stock on it. I'll tell her the truth. I don't want it. I—"

He saw Shelby. His bony elbow touched Rome Gathrie's side. Gathrie looked at Shelby and his mouth lifted at the corners in a faint, but distinctly unpleasant smile. At the store-door the lantern-jawed man turned in. Gathrie loafed on past and went into a saloon. On impulse, Shelby followed the man inside the store. He had an idea as to the man's identity.

"Mrs. Ansley," the man was saying, as Shelby slid quietly within the door and stopped, "I just can't do business with you on the 2A. Money's mighty tight now and I'm overloaded with property. Land-poor. Taxes are eating me up. So I can't buy."

"But I just got to sell!" Mrs. Ansley cried desperately. "An' if ye won't buy, Mr. Helms, who would? Nobody else could run it an' be let alone. I—I got to sell. Two thousand? Why, I'd sell for a thousand! An' *you* know it's worth thirty-five hundred, Mr. Helms. Can't ye—"

Something like a spasm passed over the clean-shaven cheeks of Quincy Helms. Shelby grinned. It was all the covetous Mr. Helms could do, to resist the temptation. But he did resist. He shook his head violently. He set his thin mouth hard.

"No, no, no! No use talking, I can't buy it. I won't buy.

He turned on his heel and was passing Shelby when a small, hard hand caught his arm and stopped him.

"You're a lawyer?" Shelby inquired pleasantly. "You can draw up papers for transferrin' property?"

"Of course," Quincy Helms said hesitantly. "Course I can."

Shelby nodded. He drew Helms back toward the watching women. He took his hat off to Mrs. Ansley.

"My name's Shelby Camp," he told her. "Mr. Helms is my lawyer, in a way. Actin' for me, he can do things he wouldn't think o' doin' for himself. He can't buy the 2A, himself, for Rome Gathrie ordered him not to, an' if he was to disobey, he might catch somethin'. But he's willin' to draw up the papers if I buy it. I heard the talk an' it just occurred to me that my U-Bar joins onto the 2A. I can throw the two outfits together, an' if *my* stock's bothered—I'll speak to Mr. Gathrie."

"Ye mean ye'll buck the thieves? Buy the 2A?"

"If you'll sell to me," Shelby nodded to the staring, haggard woman. "An' bargains—they look unlucky to me. If you'll take thirty-seven hundred for the place, takin' such property as you want

to keep, with you—"

It was a painful business getting the papers drawn in Quincy Helms' dingy little office, for Mrs. Ansley was tearfully grateful and Mrs. Vinnie Jarvis was there. And Shelby hated the focus of their attention on himself. He got up after it was over with very real relief.

"We'll take advantage o' your kindness," said Mrs. Ansley, "to take a few li'l keepsakes off the place. That's all." Again she sniffled and Shelby stopped her awkwardly.

"You happened to meet my man?" Mrs. Jarvis came to his rescue. "Down at the ho-tel? He would like to know you—"

"We're mighty good friends, already." Shelby grinned.

HE escaped from the office, leaving Quincy Helms staring somewhat bewilderedly after him. He started back to the hotel. But from the narrow space sounded—low, but imperative:

"Hey, Lieutenant! Edge in closer but don't look this way."

He obeyed, stopping at the corner of one building, looking to right and left, up and down the street. Nobody was in hearing distance. Vinnie Jarvis spoke rapidly:

"Go across the street an' through between the buildin's, yonder. Git back to the ho-tel thataway. They're a-waitin' for yuh, in Charley's Place."

"Who's waitin'?" Shelby scowled. His hand slid down to the sagging belt and stopped near Colt-butt. "Gathrie?"

"Nah! But Free Utley an' Glenn Yoakum an' some more are. Rome likely give 'em orders, then sa'ntered off to be somewheres else while 'twas happenin'. Ain't often that Rome does his own dirty work like with Al Ansley. They're red-hot because yuh flouted 'em to their faces."

"Who's Glenn Yoakum?" Shelby snapped. He recalled how Gail Freeman had used the name in quarreling with Rome Gathrie. He had got the idea, eavesdropping upon their conversation, that Glenn Yoakum was one of the men who had been chasing Gail. He thought that Yoakum must have some connection with Rome.

"He's as bad as they git," Vinnie Jarvis said emphatically. "I wouldn't put it a-past Rome to take a lot off'n Glenn—an' hope for a chance at Glenn's back. Only man I know in this country that ain't worried a mite about Glenn's gun-play is ol' Kent Freeman. An' Kent, *he* ain't huntin' a chance to turn his wolf loose. They aim to crowd yuh into a row an' the's plenty to down yuh, an' Ed Washer, the dep'ty sher'f, to take the blame."

"Well, I'd better come through this way then," Shelby nodded, with a glance upstreet to locate Charley's Place. It was straight ahead on the way to the hotel, on this side of the street. He slid in beside Vinnie Jarvis.

"Yuh don't aim to go in the'? Not with all that bunch? Say! I've heard lots about yuh, son. But that yuh was a dam' fool, I never did hear."

"In one o' my schoolbooks, I remember readin' that the best attack's a defense," Shelby grinned.

He went on, ignoring Vinnie's protests, to the corner of the backwall. He moved then along these buildings until he stood at the backdoor of that unsavory saloon known in Jericho as Charley's. He listened to the mutter of voices from within. Then he looked inside. The drinkers were a tight little knot, up near the front door. They were watching the sidewalk. And the one bartender was up there, too.

Shelby slipped inside and across to the end of the bar. Nobody saw him. He went behind it. They talked briefly, among themselves. He heard his name a couple of times but paid little atten-

tion. For there was a double-barreled shotgun on a shelf under the bar. He picked it up with eyes upon them; upon their backs. He broke the gun softly. It was loaded. He lifted it noiselessly to the bartop, then, with a hand upon the bar vaulted lightly up, to sit comfortably with the murderous weapon across his lap. At the sound, they all whirled.

"Hello, boys," Shelby said cheerfully, regarding them with one blue eye squinting against the upwreathing smoke of his cigaret. "The whole lousy outfit all together? No, not quite. The Boss-Runner is away on business that'll keep him out o' shootin'. But otherwise, I don't know that I've seen such a prize bunch o' Amarillo River-ites together. You wanted to see me?"

THEY stared hard—and incredulously—at him. Glenn Yoakum was a tall, rawboned, savage man. He lowered at Shelby, who spat absently upon the toes of Yoakum's boots. Free Utley looked sidelong at Yoakum. That one glance told Shelby that Free Utley, at least, understood who was the tallest man among them.

"Well, pop your whip," he said impatiently. "I can't be stayin' here all day while you try to make up what passes for your minds. I'm a busy man, an' I aim to be busier. There's five o' you. Only one o' me. Ought to be simple to wipe out my chalkmark. Do I have to call the roll? A' right Free Utley—first chance. Why, Free. . . . Do you mean to say you won't step right up an' start smokin'? Too bad! I thought better o' you.

"Glenn Yoakum, Terror o' the Plains especially good at chasin' girls an' runnin' from ever'body else—next! An' Glenn don't produce. No, sir!

"Ed Washer! Crooked deputy o' the crooked sheriff. Got a sawed-off shotgun an' *he* won't do a thing. Well . . . some good advice to you, Ed Washer! You resign that star an' hightail back to the deep thickets o' private life—an' maybe you won't be chewed up in the days to come.

"You with the funny face an' the mismatched eyes—hell! You wouldn't fight a sick Mexican unless you had a gang. Same for the fat boy that'll be hung before he gets a chance to grow up. An' you!" he whirled upon the bartender.

"I ain't got a thing to do with this, Mister!" cried the man of drinks, anguishedly. "No—sir, not a thing!"

"A' right, out you go! Yoakum, you an' Washer an' the two saloon-bums, you turn right, toward town. Free, you go left, toward the hotel. An', Free: look to the hang o' that cutter you're supposed to be so good with. For inside three minutes I'll be on your trail, an' when I see you, I'll start the ball rollin'. All fair an' square. Just my six-shooter to yours."

He herded them outside and there, by the swinging doors, was Vinnie Jarvis. He looked innocently at them all, Vinnie. Shelby grinned at him. Obediently, Glenn Yoakum and all but Free turned right. They looked back as they stumbled forward, but they continued going. Free Utley, thin mouth tight, whirled left and walked without looking back.

Shelby watched both movements for fifteen seconds. Then he turned and flung the shotgun back into the saloon. He looked at Vinnie Jarvis, who grinned understandingly. Then he turned and started toward the hotel. With the rap of his heels on the wooden sidewalk, Free Utley's head jerked. Without a backward glance, Utley jumped in to a doorway. Shelby did not quicken pace. He came up to that doorway and stopped.

"If ye're lookin' for Utley," a high voice remarked from inside, "ye're out

o' luck. Free went through the place like vinegar through a tin horn—an' out the back door."

Shelby grinned and continued toward the hotel. Vinnie Jarvis found him sitting on the porch. The little ex-sheriff shook his head, expelling breath explosively:

"A big charge o' giant powder might've made more commotion in this country than yuh've done," he said thoughtfully, "but I shore wouldn't do no swearin' that it would!"

CHAPTER VII

Rangers' Welcome

IN the Floating Island Saloon at Freeman City, Shelby and Marcus Button sat in a draw-poker game that included Judge Paul Ebert and Durr, of Button's store, and two of the larger cowmen of the Rio Amarillo country. It was a friendly game. Judge Ebert looked sadly at Marcus Button, who was stacking chips.

"Marcus," said the judge, "I have known you lo! these many years. I have the highest regard for your probity in most matters. But viewing the present situation in the light of that knowledge I have of you, with due regard for the logic of the situation, I am forced to see that double-stack of blues. More! I am impelled to tilt that bet by—just—three—stacks. Now, if you have my ace-full beaten—"

The others dropped out, grinning. Marcus Button pursed his mouth and with sadness equal to that which rested like a mantle on Judge Ebert's full, pink face, he shook his head.

"On the bench, Paul, I do'no' a man I got more regard for his fair-squareness. But in a poker-game—Paul! I reckon that's goin' to cost you money. Time was when you run a sandy—"

He pushed in the three stacks and faced a pair of tens with moody triumph. Judge Ebert stared and shook his head. Marcus Button's hairy hand moved out toward the pot.

"Just a minute, Marcus, just a minute. It is as I suspected. So, if you care for a receipt for your money, gaze upon my pair of jacks!"

Rome Gathrie came into the Floating Island. Shelby, facing the door, saw him come. He watched the big, swaggering figure broodingly. Five days, now, and still no word from Austin. Nor any move that he could detect, against himself. But he was irritated with Yates Putnam. The least that Putnam might have done was turn him down and tell him why.

Rome came at his negligent saunter, back toward the poker table. He looked with faint sneer at the players, then sat down upon a reversed chair with back to wall, to watch a stud game going on there. Shelby picked up the bottle on his table. He poured drinks all around. His own he tossed off in a swallow.

"This card-business is funny," he drawled, in tone loud enough to be heard. "You hear a lot about card-sharks. Now, I can prove it's a gift—like wigglin' your ears. Here's a deck that's never been opened. A' right, I bust the seal. I run through to see that all the cards are here. I hand it to—to you, Judge. You shuffle the deck. You hand her back to me. Mr. Button, you call for a card."

"King o' spades," Button said promptly. Shelby knew that Rome Gathrie had turned a little, to see. He fumbled the cards clumsily and, as by natural sequence, the king of spades was faced before Marcus Button.

"Jack o' hearts," one of the ranchmen called.

Apparently from the top of the deck, the very next card, the jack of hearts

appeared. Card after card was dealt. Judge Ebert shook his head and stared at Shelby's innocent face.

"Just luck an' a kind o' feelin' for cards," Shelby grinned. He turned, so that he stared straight into Rome Gathrie's narrowing eyes. "But sometimes that kind o' luck costs crooked tinhorns lots o' their boss's money. Funny, ain't it?"

The pulse hammered in Gathrie's thick neck. His heavy mouth tightened. Ebert and Button and Durr saw the signs, if the two cowmen did not. They stiffened slightly.

BUT at this minute the swinging doors of the Floating Island flapped back. Two men came in. Cowboys, by the look of them. But certainly not ordinary cowboys. One was two inches over six feet, lean, dark, hard-bitten, with narrow-rimmed gray hat and shirt of yellow-striped brown velvet, his dark-blue pants rammed with artful carelessness into pony-hide boots. His *buscadero* belt held up one Colt and a bowie-knife.

The other, younger man, was a tubby figure, with round, innocent red face and rounder, even more innocent, blue eyes. He was shabby in denim shirt and waist-overalls and runover boots. His dusty black hat flopped. His thick right hand was twisted into a claw. He wore a bare Colt on the left side of a Kingfisher belt, a button-headed screw in it pivoting on flat steel claws.

They stopped just inside the door and looked around. Rome Gathrie got slowly, deliberately, to his feet at that moment. His hands were swinging close over the crouching panthers which were his gun-butts. Shelby watched him. He did not think that he under-estimated Rome Gathrie. He placed the big man as one highly intelligent; one perferring to avoid unnecessary risks.

"Long's as you keep him in front o' you—" so he had told Button and Ebert that very day "—you're pretty safe. He thought he had Ansley skinned on the draw. But Ansley, with all the breaks against him, came *so* close to collectin' Gathrie, that he's not apt to make another break like that. He'll sic somebody else onto his killin'—or do it from behind a rain-water barrel!"

But now, he wondered if he had guessed right. It did look as if Gathrie planned something. He moved his hand only. It nestled against the smooth walnut stock of his gun. He waited. And a third man came flinging through the doors. A powerfully built, ruddy man, whose eyes shone icy under shaggy black brows. One quick, darting look around, this newcomer took. Then he moved back toward Rome Gathrie. He came with a sureness, something less than a swagger, that said loudly: I'm somebody!

"Kent Freeman," Judge Ebert murmured. "Kent himself!"

Freeman nodded and grunted when he was opposite Gathrie. It seemed to Shelby that Rome watched the F-Anchor owner steadily; that he was the barest shade uncertain about him. But Kent Freeman passed Gathrie by and stopped near Shelby. Up and down, he looked the slender, dapper figure. His wide, thin mouth curled unpleasantly.

"So *this* is the dude'll collect hide off the F-Anchor!" he said—and spat.

Shelby came from his chair like a spring uncoiled. The smack of his small, hard fist upon Kent Freeman's face was loud in the suddenly-quieted barroom. It and one other sound—a bartender's irritated voice—were the only sounds.

"I tell y' there's no Rangers here!" the bartender snapped.

The slapping impact of Shelby's left hand, following instantly the right to Freeman's jaw, came hard upon the bartender's statement. The tall man

howled wolf-like:

"The hell the' ain't!" he bellowed.

Freeman went to the floor. Not out, but dazed. But not too dazed to reach for the Colt on his thigh. Shelby slid to him. He stamped upon Freeman's gun-hand with a boot-heel. He hooked a toe skilfully in the "hogleg" of the handle. He twitched the .45 from the holster and sent it sliding across the splintered planks of the floor. Then he looked down:

"You're a mighty loose spitter," he said. "Get up! Wait a minute!"

HE wiped his soiled boot-toe upon Freeman's shirt, then stood back, hand on gun-butt. Once his eyes slid to Gathrie, but Rome now seemed nothing but a spectator to the discomfiture of his father-in-law-to-be.

"An' *that's* killed yuh!" Freeman said quickly. His eyes were blazing maniacally. His big hands worked spasmodically.

Over his shoulder, Shelby suddenly observed the two interested faces: Corporal Booger Tobin's lean, dark face; Private Happy Overton's round, red one. He stared at them.

"Anything we can do—*Lieutenant?*" inquired Tobin. *"Anything?"*

"You might tell Freeman, there, who I am," Shelby decided, and looked steadily at Booger Tobin.

"Lieutenant in the Ranger Force, accordin' to the word I had in Trujillo. An' with Private Overton I'm reportin' to yuh for duty in connection with—what was it the telegram says? Well, somethin' about givin' tin-horn, twenty-two caliber killers some new notions about the Rangers."

"Rangers!" Kent Freeman spat contemptuously. "Rangers! Yuh'll learn somethin'. By—Judas, you'll learn plenty! Yuh—"

Shelby made the barest motion only, with head and one hand. It was enough for the vigilant Booger. Deftly, expertly, he seized Kent Freeman by the shoulder and the slack of pants-seat. He whirled him. He moved him, first at a protestant walk, then at a trot, finally at a dead-run, to the swinging doors. Out through them he cast the owner of the F-Anchor. The expression of his dark face did not change as he propelled Freeman the length of the barroom. But he did condescend to look out over the door. He came back. He looked at Shelby, then, as by instinct, at Rome Gathrie. Inquiringly, he turned grim dark eyes again upon Shelby.

"No. I'll take care o' him, myself, when the time comes," said Shelby. "Sit down, Booger—Happy. I'm mightily pleased to have you two hellions around, again. Meet Judge Ebert—Corporal Tobin, Judge, an' Private Overton. Mr. Button—"

He introduced them all around. Booger drew from a pocket three yellow telegraph blanks which made one long message. Shelby read it—and grinned. He was in charge of Freeman County.

CHAPTER VIII

The Avenging Flame

THEY sat, five in all, in the office of Judge Ebert behind his courtroom. It was just after breakfast. Ebert had a sheaf of warrants on the long table before him. Marcus Button stared out of the window. Booger Tobin and Happy Overton propped their chairs against the wall and watched the judge and Shelby. They smoked the judicial cigars and waited for the word.

"Sixty-three," said the judge at last. "If you and the others can serve them, it will be an amazingly fine start toward cleaning things up. The small fry, any-

way, are named here. I wish that we had a couple more, for Rome Gathrie and Kent Freeman. But if we wipe out this bunch, it will seem safer to the country to come forward with evidence."

"Comes ol' Quill," Marcus Button announced. He leaned forward to look out over the windowsill. "Comin' in. Now, what is on the mind o' that ol' terrapin?"

A knock on the courtroom door came hollow-sounding through the half-open office-door. Judge Ebert nodded to Shelby, who grunted to Happy Overton. Happy got up and waddled out into the empty courtroom. He came back with a shabby little man of indeterminate age; a rancher-type with reddish hair and sharp, foxy face. He looked about, much like a suspicious animal.

"So it's true!" he said. "Rangers *is* here. What I heard. But I wanted to see with my own eyes. Before I said a word."

"About what?" Judge Ebert inquired curiously.

Quill's pale-blue eyes went roving again, but to the doors and the windows, this time. Then he bent to the judge:

"About stage-robbin'!" he whispered harshly. "The Freeman-Little Junction Stage. The robbery at Hackberry Hill two months back. Who done it—an' how he done it!"

"You mean to say you know?" Marcus Button snapped. "Why didn't you come forward then? I offered two hundred an' fifty reward for information."

"Ye never said, though, if the man that give the information'd live long enough to spend ten dollars o' the money," Quill said shortly. "But if Long Tom Camp's boy that cleaned up Casteen County is goin' to work here—well, I need that two-fifty, Button, an' I'm ready to tell ye enough to hang the robbery an' the killin' o' the guard an' that passenger onto Rome Gathrie an' Free Utley an' Glenn Yoakum an' Louis the Breed—"

"Private meeting?" a voice inquired from the courtroom. They all looked with jerking heads that way. Upton Kinchell the district attorney stood there, grinning pleasantly. He came on inside, looked flashingly at the sheaf of warrants and perched his gangling body half-on, half-off, the judge's desk.

"Had a notion our business would pick up, with the Rangers coming in. Well, we've plenty for you to do, Lieutenant. Magee's a mighty good man, but he's handicapped. It's more than the sheriff's office can handle. But now—"

Ebert looked at Shelby. One eye narrowed the barest trifle. With equal faintness, Shelby nodded understanding. He looked to Quill—or, rather, to where Quill had stood. The little man was no longer there. He was not in the room at all!

BUT he could say nothing, in the face of Ebert's warning about Kinchell. Nor could any of the others, when they, too, noted the little man's absence. Kinchell made himself comfortable. He joined in the discussion of county conditions. He suggested bringing Sheriff Donald Magee into the conference.

"This is not a conference, Kinchell," Judge Ebert said wearily. "This is merely the handing over to Lieutenant Camp of certain warrants which Magee has dodged serving."

Shelby took the thick packet and stood up. When he and Button, followed by Booger Tobin and Happy Overton, stood in the sunshine outside of the courthouse, Button grunted.

"I suppose so," Shelby nodded. "Quill didn't trust Kinchell and while we were all looking that way, he ducked out of that little side-door. He was

covered from Kinchell by the other desk. I suppose he'll come back later."

But noon passed and there was no sign of Quill. In mid-afternoon a messenger came to Shelby from Judge Ebert. Shelby found Ebert in his office.

"I think Quill has gone home, Camp. And I'm very anxious to get him here to make and sign his statement. If we can hang that stage-robbery upon Gathrie and his chief lieutenants—"

"How far's it to his place? Twenty miles? Well, I'll take the boys an' slide out there. He may have lost his nerve an' we can restore it. At worst, I can haul him back as witness."

They rode out of Freeman City and for a time kept to the county road. At Hackberry Hill, where the stage had been robbed, Shelby looked around and nodded.

"We turn south, now. That's the road to Quill's, behind the hill. That kind o' explains how he knows somethin' about the robbery. But it's goin' to be good an' dark when we find the house. If we don't have trouble findin' it."

As it turned out, they had no trouble. Far ahead of them, as they rode through the darkness, a red glare showed on the sky. They rode toward it wondering what it might be. It had sunk by the time they came up to it.

It was the low, stone house of Quill, with nothing but the blackened walls standing. Even the sheds and corrals had been burned.

"There was Quill an' his daughter an' a boy he hired," Shelby told the others. "I wonder if they got out."

"If they did, where are they?" Booger demanded. "Moon'll be up after a spell. I can see somethin', then."

He swung down and began to poke about. The house-shell was filled with embers still. Shelby and Happy, too, got off their horses. Shelby moved from the smoking remains of a shed toward the red-ended log in what had been a corral. He was puzzled. He stumbled over something, bent, scratched a match and stared, then called urgently to the others.

"Watchdog shot!" he snapped. "I was wonderin' how that fire'd spread so, from the house to these sheds, with no wind. It looks to me like Quill's nervousness about testifyin' had good sound sense behind it! That fire was set! An' likely in the ruins yonder, are Quill an' his girl an' the boy."

The moon came up after a while. But in a sky overcast. They made a leanto shelter and crouched under it on their saddles. Presently, they heard the splash of rain upon the embers in the house. In the momentary light of lightning-flashes, Shelby saw the ruins stand out against the grayness of slanting spring rain. It was like a tomb, that lonely house in the chaparral, with the wilderness of little oaks stretching away from it for miles upon miles.

"Hard case country," he said aloud. "But *por dios*, it'll be some softer before we're done!"

THEY slept in snatches, moving under their plank-shelter as the rain seeped through cracks or slanted in at the front and found them. They were up in the gray light before the dawn. Booger Tobin scouted around the ruined house.

"Well, they had the devil's own luck," he growled, coming back to the others. "Rain to wash out the trail an' all. I can't cut a single sign, Shelby."

They took poles and went about the unpleasant business of poking through the ruins for signs of bones. Happy Overton found a charred skull with enough reddish hair to identify it as Quill's. And the hole through it fairly shrieked "murder." Within ten feet of

it, Shelby uncovered another, also with a hole in the forehead. He probed the hole and got out the bullet that had killed boy or girl—he could not say which.

They took the grim evidence with them, back to Freeman City. Shelby rode moodily, head sagging. Booger Tobin looked at him, then at Happy Overton. This was a new Shelby to them. Not once, in the hectic days in Casteen County, when they rode juggling their lives on the front-sights of the Colts or Winchesters had either seen him so downcast.

"An' it's *her* father, that's responsible as Rome Gathrie, for this kind o' lowdown murderin' tactics," dinned through Shelby's head. "If that's not hard luck. . . . First girl I ever could look at with any curiosity at all, an' now I'm huntin' evidence to back a warrant for her father. . . ."

He grunted mechanically in response to Booger's question then, when it was repeated, shrugged gloomily:

"This country—it weights me down. I feel like—well, like I'd lived here always an' it was all on my chest—everything. I—" he hesitated, then lied valiantly—"don't know why I should feel that way about it."

"Me, neither," Booger agreed. "Only thing that I can see, would make yuh feel so, would be gittin' tangled up with one o' the families an' mebbe tumblin' over an apron-string. That would not be nice. To fall in love with a gal an' then go out an' shoot her pa, or her brother, or have him shootin' at yuh. . . . That'd sure be a strain on true love. 'T would be for me, anyhow—if I was that kind o' damned fool."

"What particular kind o' darned fool are you talkin' about?" Shelby demanded waspishly, glaring at the grim, dark Ranger.

"The kind o' damn fool that goes around fallin' in love! Me, I got jist one ol' lady. She's a honey an' she never plays me false!"

He reached down and slapped the sleek brown stock of the Winchester—and grinned suddenly at Shelby.

"But she's all right with me, if yuh want to do it," he said innocently. "Jist funny. . . . To think o' yuh slippin'."

He shook his head sadly and, when Shelby said nothing, broke into mournful song:

"O' all the crazy critters yuh ever
tried to halter
A woman she's the worst one, when
she's prancin' 'round the altar!"

"Snub your vocal-cords, you long-coupled calamity-howler," Shelby snarled. Happy Overton regarded him with owlish sadness and Shelby spurred General Forrest on ahead of them. Coming into Freeman City's outskirts, he reined in:

"Happy I want you to keep on goin' to Jericho. Report there to Vinnie Jarvis at the hotel. Tell Jarvis you want to check up on Rome Gathrie, Free Utley, Glenn Yoakum an' as many o' the other leadin' lights o' the Gathrie bunch as you can—where they may have been. If they were in Jericho yesterday. Get all you can on 'em. Yeh. You can eat first o' course."

"I can do the same here," Booger suggested. "While yuh do yo' augurin', with Judge Ebert. An' with—well—whoever she is that's waitin' for yuh yonder."

SHELBY whirled in the swellfork. Before Marcus Button's store Gail Freeman stood, looking at them steadily. Unaccountably, he felt himself reddening. Booger made a choking sound and rode on. Shelby gathered up the reins again. He was suddenly conscious of that blanket-wrapped bundle behind the saddle-cantle. He swung

down, fastened General Forrest with the neck-rope to the hitch rack before Button's, then ducked under. He was going straight past Gail. But she moved. He had to stop for then she stood straight in front of him. She held her ground and prevented him from passing.

"What was the trouble between you and Dad? And—did you hit him?" she demanded, evenly.

"Who said anything about it to you? Rome Gathrie? It'd be like him! Sneak, murderer, girl-stealer, tattler—yes, sir! A fine combination under one hide."

"Girl-stealer!" She picked unerringly on the one charge.

"Girl-stealer!" Shelby snarled. "He an' that bunch o' cut-throats he bosses killed Quill an' a kid out at the Circles. Threw their bodies in the house an' set it afire. An' they carried off the girl."

She stepped backward as if he had struck her in the face. She was deathly-white. She stared at him wide-eyed. And from the door of Button's a furious voice challenged Shelby.

"You're a damned liar and now—"

"Don't you shoot! Rome!" Gail Freeman screamed. She whirled and, as Rome Gathrie slid out upon the sidewalk, guns out, she flung herself in front of Shelby with arms thrown out sideway. "Rome! Don't you shoot!"

"Get out of the way!" Shelby said furiously, in his turn. "One shot at him is all I want, but I never thought he'd give me the chance at it—to my face. Move aside, Gail! Get away!"

"I won't! I—There's been too much killing. I'll not move. Rome—put your guns up. Shelby—"

"If you're so tender-hearted about that Tin Soldier—" Rome said, mockingly, and pushed the Colts back into the holsters.

"Now, move along! An' if you don't ever come back inside this store—you'll be wise," Marcus Button remarked grimly in Rome's ear. He had a shotgun under his arm. Rome turned slowly, looked at the hard-faced storekeeper, then at the shotgun. He made a negligent movement of big shoulders and stepped out to the girl. He took her arm and moved her on.

Shelby watched them go. He was seething. Rome Gathrie had got the better of him in that play. Button had to call him three times before he turned. Sullenly Shelby told of their findings at the Circles of Quill. He untied the bundle from the saddle and they walked up to the courthouse with it. Judge Ebert stared horrified at the calcined skulls. Then he sent for the one doctor of Freeman City. The doctor came. He looked at the two bullet-pierced skulls.

"Quill's and that boy's. See that bump on the skull? I treated the kid for the wound that caused it, a couple of years ago. You didn't find the girl's remains?"

"My guess must be right: that the bunch carried her off," Shelby said slowly. "Where would they take her, Judge? Where does that bunch hole up? At Gathrie's Diamond G on the Feliz?"

"Probably. At least, they often do. Nobody bothers them."

"No—o? Somebody's goin' to bother 'em quick!"

CHAPTER IX

Murder Tracks

THEY wasn't in Freeman City yesterday—none o' the outfit," Booger Tobin came into the courthouse to report. "Gathrie an' a couple rode in jist before we did—comin' like from the Rio Feliz an' the Dia-

mon' G, they say. Mebbe Happy'll find out somethin' at Jericho."

"It'll be just easin' our minds, more or less," Shelby confessed. "We haven't got a bit o' evidence, yet, against 'em."

"She was a pretty girl, that Della Quill," Ebert said with slow head-shake. "Marcus, wasn't she engaged to some cowboy? Seems to me I heard so, a year or so ago."

"Etienne Vaubois," Button nodded. "Contract-buster. He worked for Quill a spell. I think he's over on the Spade, still. Goin' to be a jolt for 'Tienne. An' he hasn't got the head to stand a lot. He's not what you'd call a bright fella."

"Well, I'm goin' down an' eat some breakfast-dinner," Shelby announced. "Then I'm goin' to comb out those warrants an' at the same time study some faces an' all in town. A lot o' the men here are in the *List o' Fugitives from Justice*—or ought to be. It'll be a real pleasure to start slammin' 'em in the *juzgado.*"

Booger Tobin had already eaten. So Shelby went alone to the Chinaman's, while Booger departed, to check in his fugitive list certain faces which had impressed him in wandering about. Shelby ate absently, staring straight ahead of him.

"I've looked all over for you," Gail Freeman told him from the door. She came in and sat upon the stool next to him. She waved off the Chinaman. Shelby drank his coffee calmly.

"I asked Rome about that—at the Circles. Shelby, you and Rome Gathrie are simply built so that you can't like each other. But Rome's fairer than you are. He admits that you've a job to do and that it's needed cleaning Freeman County is due for. He doesn't like you and doesn't pretend to. But he is not calling you a liar, except when you accuse him—"

"I'm a fair man, too," Shelby drawled. "I'd believe Rome Gathrie about that dirty work, if he'd tell me he did it. But that's the only way. Would you expect him to admit it?"

"I know him better than you do—better than anyone! Now, Shelby—" she leaned across and put a small hand on his arm: she caught his eyes and held them; she was tremendously solemn "—won't you believe *me,* when I tell you that I know he didn't do it? That he couldn't lie to me?"

She shook Shelby's arm a little. He turned and put a hand over hers. He held her, looking down into the clear gray eyes. He merely looked at her, until from the open neck of her shirt, up to the line of the dark hair upon her temples, she was smoothly red of face and throat.

"This is the hardest job I ever had," he said at last. "I never thought much about girls. Now it's plumb different. Seems to me I think about—not girls, but a girl, as much as I do about the work ahead. An' that girl—she is s'posed to be goin' to marry the prize scoun'el o' the whole bunch. An' her father, he stands in with that same scound'el."

"You—do like me?" she whispered. "Then, will you believe what I've said? That neither Dad nor Rome had a thing to do with the Quill murder or carrying off poor Della Quill? That you're wrong about both of them? That they are charged with a lot of things they know nothing at all about, simple because they're bigger than the other ranchers in this region?"

"You're a darlin' an' I reckon I can *sabe* you feelin' the way you do. But I have got to hoe my own row, honey. I can't take nobody's word for a thing. Especially when I know that word is wrong," he finished on a hard, grim note.

"Then—then."

"Don't say it!" he stopped her. "Good-bye."

HE went past her. He flung a silver dollar to the Chinaman and moved almost blindly toward the door. For if his eyes were fixed upon the street, they saw nothing of it, consciously. Instead, Shelby saw the clear, flushed face, the wide gray eyes of the girl who still sat on the stool in the restaurant.

He went stumblingly along the planks of the walk, heading mechanically for Button's store. Behind him, some distance down Freeman Street, there sounded a flat and hollow report, much like hands clapped sharply together. Another—and another. . . . Something *plupped!* dully on his hatcrown. Something struck his foot with numbing force. Something picked softly at his shirt.

Mechanically still, he turned. Two men . . . two men running up on him. Pistols leveled. One spat out orange flame as he faced that way. The bullet breathed upon his cheek. He had pulled his own gun mechanically. He was not consciously aware that it was in his hand. He began to walk limpingly toward the two running ones. Free Utley was one of them. The other he did not recognize. The distance shortened. Fifty yards had become forty; forty was thirty; thirty—Free Utley and the other man stopped short. Out of Free Utley's Colt came another blast of orange flame. But Shelby's hand jerked. . . .

He felt the bullet going past his face, it came so close to being a hit. But Free Utley fell as if his feet had been jerked from under him. Fell to knees and hands, the gun under one palm. Shelby dismissed him. The other man was jumping for the shelter of a water-trough on his right. Twice Shelby shot at him. The second shot caught the fellow as he was dropping behind the trough's end. But he dropped sidelong, across the planks of the walk. He lay still. Free Utley was prone, now. He made a hand-motion. The hand sagged.

Shelby hobbled toward them. He was very much alert to all that moved on the street to right and left and straight ahead. It might be that Free Utley had liquored or boasted himself into the bravery necessary to try this. But it might also be that he was but the forerunner of a more serious attempt to wipe out an enemy of Rome Gathrie.

But when men came cautiously out to the street again and moved toward Shelby, who stood looking down at the two moveless figures, there was no hostile move; no hostile expression that he could see. He looked up at the sheriff.

"Looks like y' jist ex-cite trouble, Ranger," Magee said gloomily. "Dam' if it don't!"

"Dam' sight nearer'n *you* got the nerve to get to trouble," Shelby said almost absently. "Who is this one? Another dog out o' the Rome Gathrie kennels?"

"Slade—'Hard' Slade, they called him," a man volunteered. "Reckon he wasn't so hard as he 'lowed. They had all the edge. I seen you come out an' seen them pop out o' the Star's door an' start runnin' toward you, shootin' as they come. They shot three times before you even turned around. I seen it!"

"Y' got awful good eyes, Lejeune, now ain't y'?" Sheriff Magee inquired of the man. He looked steadily ominously, at him.

"They'll do," the man nodded, meeting the shrieval stare easily. "Trouble is, in this neck o' the woods, a man needs 'em in the back o' his head, same's in front—or more so! But they do 'low, some folks, that things'll be different."

"Yeh? An' how's that?" Magee demanded.

"County offices an' ever'thing. That's how."

"Meanwhile . . . s'pose you don't talk so much an' get the justice on the

job?" Shelby suggested to Magee.

"All in my own time," Magee said evenly. "Don't crowd me, Ranger. I ain't used to bein' crowded. I don't like it."

AS surely as he stood there—it came to Shelby—Magee knew all about this shooting. Knew as much about it as Free Utley and Slade had known. He could tell it, merely by looking at Magee. It made him furious. So he was the softer-voiced:

"Course you don't. Nobody likes to be crowded. But lots get crowded, just the same, Magee. If I were you, I'd call the justice—an' do some thinkin'."

But the justice found them and relieved Magee of necessity for making a stand, if he planned to make one. In mechanical fashion, Clabe Ireland arrived at his conclusions and singsonged his stock verdict. Shelby nodded acknowledgment.

"What's it all about?" Booger Tobin demanded, shouldering through the crowd. Tonelessly, Shelby gave him bare details.

"Oh!" I thought 'twas somethin' serious!" cried Booger, disgustedly. "If I'd knowed 'twas jist a couple o' these draggy-fingered, glue-holstered Rio Amarillo cutthroats makin' a play, I never would've run. I've been wonderin'—" He looked with bitter contempt about the press of faces. Then he leaned to Shelby and muttered:

"See that red-head? One-eyed fella? He works down at the livery-corral. S'posed to be a hard case. Kent Freeman owns the corral, yuh know. Well . . . they want him at Sweetwater for hawse-stealin'. A' right to take him?"

When Shelby nodded, Booger moved like Nemesis, down upon that Red Bristow whose description he had found in the *Fugitive List*. Bristow saw him and his one eye narrowed. He moved mechanically backward but men were crowded behind him. He stiffened. His hand was moving toward the front of his brown duck jumper when Booger crossed the ten feet between them in a step and a jump. Red Bristow's gun-hand was seized. He was cuffed ringingly on the side of the head. His hand was twisted. He was jerked forward, released, the Colt whipped from his waistband, and he stood panting, blinking, before Shelby and Magee, not understanding the meaning of it all.

"One for yuh, Sher'f," Booger grinned. "Red Bristow, that hightailed out o' Sweetwater six months ago. Yuh'll find the reward-poster on yo' office wall. But don't put in for no reward. That's mine. Two-fifty."

Magee nodded sullenly and took the prisoner in custody. Shelby thought that the ring's sheriff was in a quandry. But he gave him little thought just then. With Booger, he went to the courthouse and began sorting warrants. Some of the names were familiar. Judge Ebert could help with notes as to where many could be found, on this ranch or that. But there remained nearly twenty of whom it could be said only that they were usually with Rome Gathrie or around his place on the Rio Feliz.

A slow step sounded outside of the office door in mid-afternoon, as they worked. A knock that was draggy, rather than hesitant, rapped the door-panels. Ebert called a "come in" and with a sight of the dusty, dark-faced dark-eyed cowboy entering, he stared narrowly. He looked swiftly sidelong at Shelby.

"Come in, Vaubois," he said heartily. "I—suppose you've heard the bad news? We thought you were on the Spade."

"Was," Etienne Vaubois said tonelessly. Come back today. Heard about the killin' at them Circles. Come up to git the business straight in m' head, Judge. Mind tellin' me about it?"

HE stood like a dumb, hurt animal during the telling. He stared with dull eyes down at the floor. At the end, he nodded slowly and went wandering back to the door. There, he stopped.

"If Quill'd told you all about the stage robbery, you'd arrested Gathrie an' them others, huh? Jailed 'em, huh?"

"That's what we wanted," Ebert nodded. "But he didn't tell us enough to go on, Etienne."

Vaubois nodded, staring out into the corridor. He went out. On impulse, Shelby got up, waved Booger back and followed. But he did not catch the bronc buster until he reached the courthouse door. Vaubois stood there, looking fixedly downstreet.

"Will you take a ride with a few o' us?" Shelby asked him. "Out to the Diamond G an' maybe to a crack at that gang that got your girl? I know how you feel."

"Do you?" Vaubois said, looking at him steadily, but without expression. "You ever been in a fix like mine? No. I don't want to ride with you—to the Feliz or nowheres else."

"You're a queer hairpin," Shelby grunted, falling into step beside him, as Vaubois moved slowly toward the center of town. "I'm givin' you a chance to hit a lick at the ones that did the dirty work at the Circles, an' you turn it down."

Vaubois said nothing. He went on at his bowlegged, rocking walk, looking blankly straight ahead. Shelby was puzzled. But he wanted recruits for the party he would take. Then, looking mechanically at the horses at the White Elephant's hitch-rack, he stopped. He caught Vaubois by the arm.

"That your horse? That sorrel?"

Vaubois looked at the Double Circles brand on the Sorrel's shoulder. He shook his head.

"Nah. Mine's a black—same brand—back at the co'thouse."

Shelby let go Vaubois' sleeve. A Double Circles Sorrel might mean nothing at all. But it was interesting to see a sweaty horse with old Quill's brand, at the hitch-rack, the day after the murder. Particularly when they had found not a single head of horses on the place. He went past the White Elephant's door. In Marcus Button's he asked Durr to find out who rode the Sorrel in. Durr nodded and went out.

"Nigger George," he said when he came back. "He's a no-good tramp cowboy that was workin' on the F-Anchor, last. But he quit. Funny about that hawse, Shelby. . . . I seen George early yeste'day an' he was riddin' a li'l ol' bay pony that you could have a dozen like it an' still be afoot. An' he was bummin' drinks, then. Now, he's buyin' 'em. Double Circles. . . ."

"He was out o' town yeste'day?"

"Yeh. An' he rode out with Utley."

Shelby grinned tightly. He slid down from the counter and went, walking fast, toward the door. He went down the walk and pushed through the White Elephant's doors. There was a thick crowd of drinkers there. He stood staring from one to another.

"Who owns that sorrel Circles crowbait at the rack?"

"I do, an' what's it to yuh?" a belligerent voice answered.

CHAPTER X

Guns Cut Loose!

THE speaker was a big, puffy-faced and dark young cowboy. His overalls and hat and boots were old. But he had a new and expensive double-shell belt around his waist. The Colt on his thigh was old, but the holster was new as the belt. He

glared at Shelby, who was walking up on him.

"Then I want to have a little talk with you," Shelby told him quietly. "I'm Lieutenant Camp, Ranger Force."

"I ain't done nothin' to talk to a Ranger about an' I ain't talkin' to none o' the breed. An' I never seen one yet could run a sandy on me, neither!"

Shelby was no more than a yard away from him, now. Nigger George's hand was very close to the black Colt-butt. Then from somewhere behind him, a foot caught Shelby's. He stumbled and fell to hands and knees. Somebody twitched the pistol from his holster as he fell. He turned swiftly, but hand and gun had vanished, Nigger George was drawing. His distorted face told what he meant to do.

Shelby's hand snapped into the front of his shirt. He came to his feet with hide-out in hand. He pushed forward. His muzzle was ramming Nigger George in the belly before the cowboy's gun was clear of the holster. Nigger George made a choking sound. Shelby stepped flashingly sideway.

"Up with those hands or, *por dios,* I'll blow a hole in you a dog could trot through!"

Nigger George's hands jerked toward his ears. His face was abruptly of a bluish-gray, like a dying man's. And from the doorway, a grim, even voice inquired of Shelby what the trouble was.

"Come on in, Booger. One o' these bushwhackers tripped me an' snatched my gun. Line the whole dam' bunch up. Take every gun off 'em. First wiggle you notice, stop it with lead! I'm tired foolin' with these here side-winders."

He twitched the Colt from Nigger George's holster, patted him expertly in search of hide-outs, then whirled to help Booger. With a good deal of protest, the White Elephant's crowd gave up Colts, Smith and Wessons, Remingtons. Far up the bar, on the door, Shelby's Colt was found. He reholstered it and looked grimly about, then at the pile of weapons.

"Tomorrow mornin', the bunch o' you can come to Judge Ebert an' ask for your guns back. If you have got a good record, to his notion, he'll likely hand 'em back. *Shut up!"* he snarled, as a wordless mutter rose. "Booger! Slide down to the courthouse an' bring back that bunch o' warrants. Use that sorrel Double Circles horse."

He stood alone, leaning negligently against the long bar, alternately twirling left and right Colts on the trigger guards. The White Elephant crowd, huddled weaponless against the side-wall, regarded him with varied expressions. Some were honest men, good citizens of town or county. He could almost tell them by their expressions. For they seemed almost amused by the affair, some of them. The rest were patient. But those who were not good citizens—they lowered at him as he lowered at them.

Through the door now came that burly, rather swaggering, belligerent, Lejeune, who had exchanged words with Sheriff Magee on the street, over the dead Utley and Slade. He looked blankly at the scene. A slow grin came to his devil-may-care face. He moved back to Shelby.

"Looks like the real quill," he grinned. Then, in a tone too low for others to hear it: "Magee's comin'—hot foot. With a couple gun-totin' dep'ties. He might aim to interfere. . . ."

Shelby looked searchingly at Lejeune, considered him, then made his decision.

"Like to take on as special Ranger for a while? It might not be approved at Austin, but that'll be after while. Meantime, you'd walk an' talk an' act an' *shoot* as a Ranger."

WITH Lejeune's nod, he muttered the oath and Lejeune grunted affirmation. Then he looked inquiringly at Shelby, walked back to the door and stood just to the side of it with broad back to the front wall. His thumbs were hooked—one in shell-belt, the other in shirt-front. He looked sidelong when Magee and two hard-faced young men crowded through, past him, hands on guns.

"What's this?" Magee barked at Shelby. "What's the idee?"

"They call it different things in different places," Shelby said meditatively. "I'd call it a lookin' over, here an' now. Ah! Here's Booger with the warrants an' the *Fugitive List*. Come on, Booger. Let's get busy. Lejeune! Take that end. Booger will get their names an' push 'em over to you. I'll check the names on the warrants an' sort o' keep a general eye on things."

"Now, listen, Ranger—" Magee stopped when Shelby looked steadily at him. But the presence of his deputies seemed to stiffen his resolution. He moved toward Shelby.

"Magee," Shelby drawled. "I wouldn't say I had doubts about you. I haven't. I feel right well acquainted with you. I don't think you could do a thing that'd surprise me. Now, I warn you: Don't interfere with the Rangers or I'll slam you into a cell in your own jail. You don't have to believe that unless you want to. If you want a showdown—pop your whip!"

"I'm sher'f," Magee said sullenly. "Y' can't come into my county an' start runnin' things over my head."

"Start the procession," Shelby said impatiently, to Booger. "First name: Henry Sydney. No warrant for him under that name. Anybody can vouch that's the name he uses here?"

Two men could. But Booger, with a catlike grin, checked the eager Sydney in his progress toward the door. He had a "memory like a mud-flat," Happy Overton claimed. Nothing crossed it but left its track; and he studied Bible Two, the *Fugitive List* as never he studied anything else. So he could look sardonically at Henry Sydney; out of his memory he called up a name.

"Purcell," he drawled, "they ain't forgot the murder at Birdville. Tarrant County wants yuh, Purcell. They got a rope up there; wrigglin' like a snake, it is, ready to fit yo' neck. . . ."

On warrants, or Booger Tobin's memory of their descriptions in the *List*, twenty-four men were taken out of the drinkers of the White Elephant. Shelby turned at last to Sheriff Magee.

"You'll hold my prisoners, o' course. I want a talk with Nigger George after we come to the jail."

The herder procession of sullen prisoners was almost at Courthouse Square when Shelby, in the rear with Nigger George, saw three watchers of his maneuver. George carried all the confiscated weapons, strung together by cords through the trigger guards. He looked nervously, furtively, at Gathrie. Shelby evaded the wide eyes of Gail Freeman, to grin mockingly at Gathrie and Kent Freeman as he passed them.

"Our little Tin Soldier will last rather less than a week," Rome Gathrie's threat came clearly after him. "Less than that!"

The prisoners were locked in the single big cell behind the twin rows of small cells. All but Nigger George. Shelby held him in the sheriff's office for questioning. But he got nothing out of George but defiant grunts and snarls. At suppertime, George was locked in a small cell first of the tier behind the office-door. Shelby posted Lejeune as extra guard.

ROME GATHRIE was finishing a meal in the restaurant when Shelby and Booger came in. Shelby regarded

him amusedly. Gathrie reddened. But when he got up and flung a dollar to the Chinaman, he stopped at their table as he passed.

"Quite a loud-mouth—even for a Tin Soldier," he drawled. "And it thinks it can buck *me!* Well . . . a few others have tried that. You can read their epitaphs on the boards in Boot Hill."

"What a long tail our pup has got," Shelby grinned. "You know—what's the name? Not your Texas-name, but the real one—the one you dropped when you left California, so fast—but never mind. What I meant to say is, you're amazin'ly like those Black Waxy Country legislators, down in Austin; you are so long on talkin'—so short on doin' anything."

He leaned back comfortably, to look the big figure up and down with all the amused mockery he could manage. Gathrie was stiff, now. Something—perhaps the allusion to California—had pushed him very near the line.

"I swear," Shelby grunted, as to Booger, in mild exasperation. "I can't make this comical renegade out, to save my neck, Booger. I've handed him chance after chance to slap leather with me—just a common, garden variety o' Ranger. An' will he take the chance? Have you noticed it?"

"Yuh been askin' him to show nerve, is the trouble," Booger said weightily, with the air of one discussing a scientific problem. "Yuh been askin' too much."

"You—" Gathrie said thickly, leaning forward a little; big, white hands clenching and unclenching. "I promise you one thing that you'll get: the kind of death that will leave you screaming and begging to die, for hours! That—"

"He aims to bite yuh," Booger nodded gravely. "Hydrophoby is a turrible thing, Shelby. Barred in some states."

He got up negligently. Gathrie whirled and lurched out.

"I'm goin' to relieve Lejeune," said Booger.

Five minutes afterward, Shelby followed. He moved toward the jail. It was dark, now. Along Freeman Street the lights were showing from house, store and saloon. There was a good deal of noise in the saloon. From a dance-hall around the corner from the White Elephant on a side street, there was the tinny clamor of a piano and the shrill laughing of girls.

He was fifty yards from the courthouse when a volley sounded from the sheriff's office in the corner. Shelby jumped into a run and with a Colt in each hand raced toward the doorway. From the yard, ten or twelve feet from the door, there was a blossoming of yellow flames. Someone, outside, was shooting at the doorway. Followed instantly a heavy report—a sawed-off shotgun, fired inside.

Shelby yelled at the man outside. He was answered by a shot. He fired twice as he came without checking speed. The shot bellowed again, in the office. Shelby saw that the man at whom he had fired was down. He jumped past him and looked around the jamb into the place. Almost under him, almost across the doorsill, with arms flung out limply, a dead man lay. His whole back seemed blown away.

ANOTHER man sprawled in the center of the room. He lay upon his back. There was blood on his face. One lamp still burned in its wall-bracket. The others were shattered. The place reeked of oil and powder-smoke. From up behind a desk, at Shelby's yell, Booger Tobin appeared. He had a shotgun across his arm. A long scarlet weal crossed left cheek.

"Yuh git that fella outside? Then I reckon she's a mop-up."

"What happened? Where's Lejeune?

An' Magee's jailer?"

"Lyin' yonder in the corner, under that table. I do'no' what shape they're in. I never had time to look. They was like that when I come in. Lyin' there all bloody. An' as I was lookin' at 'em, this bunch made a run at me through the door. I got one with the six-shooter and dropped down behind the desk an' snatched up Magee's shotgun. I whanged away but missed the first shot. One fella jumped outside. The other dropped down an' begun to shoot holes in the desk. He burned my face some. But I got him."

Shelby jumped toward the iron-sheeted door that opened from office to jail-corridor. It was still locked. And as he turned toward the corner where the jailor lay, Lejeune sat up and looked drunkenly about. His eyes were glazed; his dark hair—blood-caked, matted over his forehead—gave him the look of a maniac. He got to his feet, holding to a leg of the overturned table. His pistol was still in its holster.

"Somebody—cracked me—over my head," he said thickly. "What happened?" Jail-delivery?"

"Don't know yet," Shelby grunted. He crossed the office quickly. Lejeune, he saw, was merely gashed on the head. He hauled the jailor from under the table—still unconscious. His head was terribly battered and blood-caked. But the keys were on the floor beside him. Shelby took them and jumped back to unlock the door. The light still burned half-way down the line of cells on the corridor. And a wild yell of many voices demanded explanation of the shooting, from the bullpen at the corridor's end. Shelby stood scowling.

CHAPTER XI

Brands of Torture

SHELBY whirled back to the end-cell in which he had locked Nigger George. It was empty. The door was closed, but unlocked. He shook his head dazedly. Nigger George gone, but all the others—from the sound of them—still there! And when had the single prisoner escaped?

The office was crowded with Magee and his deputies and a press of curious townsmen. Shelby cleared it of all but Magee and the two deputies and looked thoughtfully. Lejeune an' the jailor are knocked out. Nigger George is let out an' then the door is relocked. What I want to know is: why would one o' that gang be favored over the rest? Why—" he stopped, for a thought had come.

"There were two bunches," he said, with conviction. "One concerned just with Nigger George. This one lays out Lejeune an' the jailor an' lets George out. Booger comes in right afterward. Then the second bunch o' jail-deliverers arrives bent on lettin' out everybody. It runs into lead . . . Lejeune! You haven't got a notion about the men that cracked you?"

"Not a notion. I was standin' up. I'd been wanderin' to an' fro, readin' reward-notices. I was lookin' at one when it seemed like the world come down on my head."

The jailor, recovering his senses, was equally ignorant. He had been sitting at the sheriff's desk. Something landed on his head. That was all he knew.

"I'll sleep here, tonight, I think. So will you, Booger," Shelby announced grimly. "Look around outside an' see if you can figure out anything from the trail, will you?"

Booger went outside and came back a half-hour later to report that two men

had walked to two horses which had stood at the back of the building. They had mounted and ridden off to the north. Shelby nodded. Toward the Rio Feliz, toward the Diamond-G, of course.

The night passed quietly. At breakfast-time, Happy Overton came in from Jericho. He had little to report, except that none of the Gathrie crowd could prove an alibi by Jericho, for the time of the Quill murders. Within an hour, Shelby, Booger, Happy and Lejeune were riding out of Freeman on the Jericho road. But a mile west of the county seat they turned north-east, away from the road and heading for the Diamond-G. Rome Gathrie, Shelby knew, was somewhere ahead of them.

Within five miles, they slid the horses down into an arroyo and Booger checked them with uplifted arm. He bent and studied the floor of the water-course, his head lifting until he stared at the end of the two-horse trail, where it went out of sight around an elbow. He moved on, the others trailing him.

For a mile they followed the plain hoofprints of the two riders. Then, grotesquely sprawled across a boulder, arms up as if to protect his head, they found Nigger George. He had been shot in the back—doubtless as he cowered there. Something twinkled on the wrists. Handcuffs!

They turned the body over. The face was distorted in frozen horror. Shelby picked up one of George's hands, to stare at the ends of the stiffened fingers. They were blackened, seared.

"I'll be damned!" Booger grunted. "Shelby, my notion is, Nigger George was in on the business at Quill's. But he done the fool stunt o' ridin' that hawse off the Circles into town. A dead give-away an' yuh collared him. So Gathrie had 'em take him out o' jail. An' they never trusted him. So they burnt him some, to teach him a lesson yuh might say, then killed him."

"They? Just one set o' tracks leavin' here. "I'll bet that sorrel o' George's is within a mile o' this, grazin'."

THEY topped out of the arroyo on the trail of the killer. Presently, they saw the sorrel, a mile away, through the glasses. He was saddled and bridled still. They left him and trailed on toward the Rio Feliz, going cautiously, if fast, through the chaparral. They began to see bunches of cattle, toward noon. Shelby was inquisitive about those cattle. Through the glasses, at first, but presently closeup, he studied brands. And the more he saw of Diamond-G stuff, the more amazedly did he shake his head.

"The nerve!" he told the others. "Why, you might think blottin' brands was a legal business an' one to be done not with any ability, but just judged accordin' to speed! Did you ever in your born days, Booger, see as clumsy a lot o' burnt irons? A lick an' a promise is all any o' that stuff has had. I don't know this country—don't know the brands—but there's a dozen brands I've seen that I'd be willin' to swear I know what they were before they were blotted an' vented an' that Diamond-G iron run on. You'd think that he believed nobody would dare notice it."

And he grinned pleasantly. For among those twelve he had mentioned was the Rafter-6. And that was the iron of Roaring Sam Loftus of the Verde Flat, two hundred miles north and west of this Rio Amarillo country. Roaring Sam Loftus. . . . How he would love to hear that ten-twelve head of Rafter-6 steers now walked the Diamond-G range with a burned brand that a child could detect. Shelby gave himself over to pleasing visions.

"Look at that," Happy Overton grunted when they reached the Rio Feliz, having forded the wide, shallow

Rio Amarillo. He doubled in the saddle and shook with silent amusement. He was not a talkative soul and the things which amused him often failed to amuse others. But this was a neatly-painted sign—a board twelve inches wide and six feet long, nailed across the chaparral posts. They read it—and laughed:

ROME GATHRIE'S FORD
GO THE OTHER WAY!

And then, grinning widely, they pushed the horses into the clearer water of the little Rio Feliz and splashed up the other bank. Here they stopped for a look across the peaceful country. Raking the horizon ahead, Shelby made out a small stone house. It had no sheds, no corrals, within sight.

"That can't be the Diamond-G house," he puzzled aloud. "Not big enough. More like a line-camp, huh?"

Cautiously keeping down and in shelter of the dwarf oaks, they "rounded up" the house. It lay silent before them. They dismounted and moved closer. To Shelby, when twenty yards away, there came a droning, buzzing sound, of a bee-hive roused. Booger snaked up noiselessly beside him.

"Flies!" he decided. "Somebody's left somethin' the' that drawed 'em. One thing ce'tain as death an' taxes: nobody is in th' Shelby. Couldn't stand it with so many flies."

Boldly, he stood up and walked to the corner of the one-room cabin. He kept close to the wall while Shelby covered his approach with a carbine. Booger peered through the doorway, then whirled suddenly and yelled:

"Come on! Somebody's been ahead o' us!"

THEY ran up to him. He pointed briefly to the ground, to the hoof-prints which they knew from following them through the arroyo up to Nigger George's body—and to the Rio Feliz where they had vanished. The trail of the killer. And inside lay a man—or what was left of a man. For he had been literally cut to pieces. Shelby stared then gagged and turned away. But Booger went on inside. In ten minutes he came grimly out.

"Shelby! the' was a woman in the' with that dead fella. Near's I can make out the trail, she went off with this one that downed Nigger George. I'm goin' to look around some more."

He poked about the walls of the line camp. Shelby found him after a time, hunkered, smoking absently, staring blindly straight ahead. He looked up.

"I swear, I don't rightly know what we're on the trail of yet. That fella, Shelby, he never come like we done from the ford straight here. Mebbe he missed the place in the dark. He went on. I cut his trail from the ford an' it leads on to the house, the big house, mebbe. He come back to the cabin, here, an' then's when he carved up that fella an' rode off with the woman."

"I reckon there's no use goin' into Puzzleology, now," Shelby shrugged. "Let's amble on up toward the house an' see what's there."

He pondered as they rode with greater caution than before, along a well-beaten trail. Who was the dead man? Lejeune, well-acquainted with this country, knew him only as a hard-faced rider seen in company with Gathrie men. Who was the woman? Della Quill? There were several reasons for believing it had not been the girl carried off at the Circles. With such as Glenn Yoakum and Rome Gathrie on the scene, a comparatively unimportant gang-member would hardly have got her.

"Funny about Rome Gathrie," Shelby told Lejeune. "He left Freeman headin' this way. But his trail didn't come past the line-camp back there. Is there an-

other road to the Diamond-G?"

"Two-three, they say," Lejeune nodded. "Reckon Rome took one o' the others, for reasons o' his own. But I reckon he's at the house ahead o' us."

They stopped in shelter of the chaparral that ringed the Diamond-G's long, low, cut-stone house. Through the glasses, trained down a glade that opened on the house-lot, Shelby studied the place. Not a sign of life anywhere about it. He saw a shed, a rough, open-sided leanto. Evidently, it was a saddle-room. But no saddle showed. He put the glasses back.

"I don't think anybody's home," he told Booger. "Let's slide up to the back an' inside."

They rode around until they could dismount and walk up to the shed, covered by it from view of anyone in the house. There they stopped, to listen and look. Then they ran to the house-wall. No sound came, to denote life within the house.

"I'm goin' inside," Shelby decided.

Booger Tobin came after him. They stopped for a brief space beside the back door, then slid inside. Booger snatched at Shelby's arm. He pointed across the kitchen to a corner behind the pine table that flanked the stove. There was what looked like a bundle of old clothes, huddled in the L of the two walls. While Booger covered the doors into the other rooms, Shelby with guns pointing downward, moved silently toward the table. He looked over the table. He put out a boot-toe and prodded the still figure. It was a man and he was dead.

THEY left him there without more examination. They flung back a half-opened door into the long front room. Shelby spat out a startled oath with sight of four blanket-covered figures lying on pallets about the floor. There were empty whiskey-flasks here and there. Cigaret and cigar stubs littered the floor. The daylight, coming through dirty windows, illumined two faces of the four: a black-bearded face which Shelby recalled having seen in the White Elephant a time or two; and a smooth, brown face—a Mexican's. The thick-lipped mouth of the Mexican was curled, slightly open, under stringy black mustache. There was the glint of dark eyes, seeming to watch sardonically from between slitted lids as Shelby took a single step forward.

"Up yuh come!" Booger Tobin yelled. "Reachin' for a star!"

"St. Pete's the only one who could wake them with a yell," Shelby Camp told Booger evenly, moving into the room.

The four had been killed, evidently without waking them, by a single knife-stroke each. Sure of this—and that nobody else was in the place—Shelby called Happy Overton and Lejeune. They came in, to gape about in horrified amazement. Booger went outside, to study the trails about the house. Shelby and the others returned to the kitchen, to the dead man there.

"H a n d s tied. . . . Barefoot. . . . Ankles tied. . . . Shot. . . ." Shelby ticketed point by point. "This was the last man killed—o' course. Feet burned just as Nigger George's hands were burned. But against the stove, not with matches. Why? Did he know somethin' he wouldn't tell?"

He went out to his saddle and from the pocket got the sheaf of warrants. Lejeune identified the bodies. Every man was named in a warrant—three for murder; two, including the one who had been tortured in the kitchen, for cattle-thefts. He made notations on the warrants; stood staring blankly.

"I want to take a look at my U-Bar place next," he decided abruptly. "Then at the F-Anchor. I want Gathrie!"

CHAPTER XII

The Ranger Breed

IT was a bare ten miles to the U-Bar of the late Free Utley. A log-and-stone cabin, with a couple of sheds and corrals, it overlooked the sluglish reaches of the twisting Rio Amarillo. Again, Shelby and the others stopped in the shelter of a chaparral thicket to look at the house. But there was smoke coming from the chimney, here. There were a half-dozen saddles hanging on the wall under the porch roof. There were horses in a round corral behind the house itself.

"Separate!" Shelby grunted. "We'll round up the place from four sides. I'm goin' in the back an' I'm goin' fast! I think I may get the drop on the bunch before they know lightnin' has struck. If you hear me yell, or hear shootin' come on."

He made the back of the house without sign of discovery. He slid quietly along the wall and listened at the open door. Then he slipped inside, into a dark room. He crossed it softly moving toward the murmur of voices from somewhere ahead. His hand touched a rawhide string. Then there sounded a rustle behind him. He stiffened and half-turned.

"Who's that?" a voice challenged him from somewhere to his left. "Talk up, or—"

Shelby jerked the latch-string and pulled the door open. A pistol bellowed behind him, but he was already through; out in the lighter room, facing Rome Gathrie and four men whose hands had gone instinctively to pistols.

"Pup! Pup!" he snapped at them. "Grab a star or grab a harp!"

He expected attack from the room behind him—that in which somebody's shot had bellowed, someone's bullet had sung past him. He lowered his right hand, very swiftly. The hammer fell and a bullet crashed through the door, to be answered by a yell.

"Gathrie!" he snarled. "You *look* like drawin' that gun an' you'll get hit in the nose by the Pearly Gates bangin'!"

Gathrie's hand fell away from pistol-butt. But out of the corner of his eye Shelby caught a motion of that man farthest from him. He shifted left-hand gun flashingly. With the roar of it, the man screamed. Shelby had no time to watch him. He menaced the others with both guns, while the sound of running feet came from the porch outside.

From the back room there sounded, now, the muffled report of a pistol—then another shot and a third. And Happy Overton yelled reassurance to Shelby from that room.

Booger Tobin and Lejeune popped inside the front door with cocked pistols before them. They stopped, covering Gathrie and the others. Happy Overton yelled again, then opened the door behind Shelby. His round, innocent face came through.

"A' right in yere?" he inquired in soft drawl. "A' right back yere, too. I got one feller. He like to got me. . . ."

Booger Tobin's dark face had been moving to right and left as he studied the prisoners. He moved across to look down at the man Shelby had shot. He straightened:

"Barney Tiller. Yuh recall when he bust' jail at El Paso the night before his hangin', Shelby? Yuh was with the company when the word come. An' these others—I reckon we'll find the names on our warrants. . . ."

"You've no warrant for me," Gathrie said furiously, as Lejeue came to disarm him.

"You think because you had Nigger George murdered, there's nothin' to connect you with the Quill murders?"

But Shelby scowled. For if he were any judge of expressions natural or artificially assumed, this was news to Gathrie, this word of Nigger George's death.

"What'd the bunch at the Diamond-G do?" he asked. "That you had 'em murdered?"

AND this time he *was* certain that Gathrie could not have faked the amazement that, for one brief interval, twisted his face, laxed his full mouth, widened his blue eyes. The two others, whose names Booger had got and was going out to investigate on the warrants, gaped incredulously at Shelby.

"What are you talking about?" Gathrie snapped. "Nigger George murdered—bunch at the Diamond-G murdered—what do you mean? Who was murdered at my place? When?"

"You'll find out in town," Shelby said curtly. "Where's Glenn Yoakum? He was in town when we left, I think."

"Glenn's a free agent," Gathrie shrugged. His expression was vacant. He was like a man very busy with his thoughts, resentful of interruption. Shelby thought that he would have given much to know what occupied that shrewd, bold, unscrupulous brain. But there was no way to tell, now.

They started for the county seat across the east range of the F.-Anchor, but on a course that would clear the house. Happy Overton and Lejeune left the party, to round up on the Diamond-G and drive to Freeman City all the Rafter-G stuff they could find. Shelby grinned at that thought. He promised himself the pleasure of keeping Gathrie in custody until the arrival of Roaring Sam Loftus from Verde Flat.

One of the prisoners rejoiced in the very descriptive nickame of "Slats." He was a cheerful soul and not even the handcuffs upon his wrists could dampen his good spirits. And Gathrie now developed an unexpected ability for cowboy clowning. He and Slats passed the time as the five of them rode south in describing the end that would come to Shelby and Booger Tobin. They sang the unprintable version of *Chisholm Trail* and then, to an old ballad-tune, Gathrie put an equally salty song which had to do with the exploits of a Tin Soldier.

Coming up to the top of a rise, Shelby looked mechanically around the horizon ahead, then grunted to Booger and pulled in. He got his glasses out and trained them on the chaparral a half-mile ahead and below. Men—how many he could not tell—were riding among cattle down there. F-Anchor men, of course. And, equally of course, friends of Gathrie's, enemies of Rangers.

He withdrew back over the rise, pulling the others with him by a hand-jerk. They turned off and went by winding stock-trails, east for a while, then south again. For a couple of miles Shelby believed that they had not been seen. Then there came a chorus of *yip-yip-ping* from behind them. Shelby turned in the saddle. So did Gathrie, who grinned catlike at sight of the cowboys coming with a thuttering drum of hoofs, the little horses seeming to double like racing jack-rabbits.

"Pull in," Shelby grunted, drawing his pistol. He ranged up beside Gathrie, who, with Slats, was laughing audibly.

Booger Tobin, a gun in each hand, put himself between Slats and the sullen other prisoner. They waited for the F-Anchor riders, in whose van rode two figures whom Shelby recognized instantly.

"What's the idee?" Kent Freeman roared, as his men pulled in their mounts. "Rome! What's the—"

"Ne' mind talkin' to him!" Shelby snapped. "I'm doin' the talkin' for this party. These fellas are my prisoners."

"Take 'em away from the Rangers," a red-headed cowboy yelled and the others whooped enthusiastically. There were seven of them, besides Kent Freeman and Gail. "Rangers don't amount to nothin' around the Rio Amarillo!"

"Shut up!" Shelby bellowed at them. "Yo'll find out mighty soon what the Rangers amount to—on the Rio Amarillo or anywhere else! First move any o' your bunch makes, Freeman, I am goin' to kill Gathrie an' Tobin will kill the others. Then we'll see how many o' you-all we can down. Nobody ever took a prisoner off me an' nobody's goin' to get one they can *use* off me now! Gathrie! You tell 'em what *you* think about it: if you want a try made!"

HE rammed the muzzle of cocked pistol hard into Gathrie's well padded ribs.

"He probably has nerve enough to shoot a man unarmed," Gathrie said savagely. "A handcuffed man, at that."

"But you weren't always handcuffed, or unarmed," Shelby cried reproachfully. Then abruptly, his face hardened and his voice:

"Freeman! You're just huntin' trouble! I haven't got a warrant for you—yet! But it's a question o' time, the company you keep an' all, when I will have one. An' if I get a warrant for you, I'll jerk you out o' the middle o' your nightshirt! You're buckin' the Rangers this trip! You think you amount to a lot in this country. Well, to me, you're nothin'! Now pull that gang out o' this, before shootin' starts!"

Kent Freeman glared impotently. But it was his eyes that fell. He snarled at the cowboys. Gail pushed up beside him; whispered urgently to him. He listened and made an angry movement with his big shoulders.

"Back to the herd," he ordered the cowboys. "I'm goin' to town with Rome."

"With *my* permission," Shelby reminded him. "Ask for it."

"Can we go to town with you?" Gail asked for him, evenly.

"Keep ahead o' us, then," Shelby said—as tonelessly.

They made the remainder of the trip almost in silence. No more of clowning for Gathrie. When Slats made one humorous comment, he was checked by a snarl from the big man. Shelby grinned. He knew that Gathrie was writhing as he rode helpless, handcuffed, under the girl's eyes.

Men came running from every doorway as this amazing procession came along Freeman Street through the county seat. Gathrie rode with eyes grimly, furiously straight ahead.

In the sheriff's office, Donald Magee looked at Gathrie and at Shelby, then away. He was a worried man, the ring's sheriff. It was very obvious. He moved over to Kent Freeman, who glared at him and ostentatiously turned his back.

"Bond," Freeman snarled, a moment later. "I want to fix up bond for Rome—dam' quick! Magee, git busy!"

"But—but—" Magee stammered. "Mr. Freeman—I—I got to serve a warrant on Rome. I—*I* can't help it!"

"Warrant?" Gathrie said slowly. "What's the charge?"

"Murder an' kidnappin'," Magee burst out desperately.

"Who swore to that?" Guthrie snapped.

"Della Quill! Today."

"Della Quill! Why she—she's—" Gathrie stopped, swallowed, then tried again: "She's crazy," he finished weakly.

"Serve your warrant an' lock 'em up," Shelby snapped impatiently. "I've got things to find out. *Andarle!*"

He saw them in a cell. Then he went quickly to Judge Ebert.

Della Quill. . . . Had she been the woman in the Diamond-G line camp?

Who had been the man who had let her go?

"Yes," said Ebert, shrugging heavy shoulders helplessly. "She came in to me and told the story of the murders out at the Circles. She said that it was Gathrie and his mob. She doesn't know who shot Quill and the boy. There was a lot of shooting. Then the door was broken down. Gathrie and twelve or more men burst in. She saw her father drop, after—she thinks—he had killed at least one of the gang. The boy was shot down. She was dragged out and away on a horse."

"But how'd she get away?" Shelby scowled. "How was it that Gathrie showed up in town the very next mornin'?"

"They got back to the Diamond-G, by her story. There was a lot of drinking. She was tied up in a side-room—poor kid!—and had to listen. Later, Gathrie had one of his men, whom she knows only as 'Dobe,' take her away for safe keeping. Dobe kept her a prisoner at the old line-camp near the Feliz ford. And a man from the house, one who felt sorry for her, she says, came into the line-camp, quarreled with Dobe, killed him and brought her to the edge of town."

"She tell you that, before this kind-hearted fella rescued her, he killed five men at the Diamond-G house, knifin' four of 'em while they were asleep an' shootin' the last one after he'd burned his feet against the cookstove; an' that he was the one that let Nigger George out o' jail?"

"But Nigger George was in the gang at the Circles!" Ebert cried bewilderedly. "Why would this deliverer-of-virtue-in-distress want to risk a jail delivery—"

SHELBY put up a hand to check him. There was a grim little smile at his tight lip-corners. His eyes were narrowed. He shook his head slowly:

"I don't think we *care* a lot. In fact, I'm certain we don't want to know too much about the business. But, Judge, s'pose there was a man who wasn't just sorry for the girl, but dam' mad about the whole affair. He knows that Nigger George was in on the deal, and has the names o' the others. But George is in jail. He is not goin' to talk in there. So this fella lets George out, then takes him off to a quiet place an' persuades him—there's lots o' persuasion in a box o' matches, Judge!—to say who killed Quill an' carried off the girl. Then he kills George for Tally One."

Shelby let his words sink in.

"*Bueno*. He goes to the Diamond-G. Finds the sleepers an' knifes four. Persuades the fifth one to tell where the girl is, then kills him. An' comes to the line-camp. Here, with sight o' the girl, he goes plumb wild, cuts Dobe all to pieces. So you see, Judge—"

"Ah, yes," Ebert nodded. "It could have happened, so—but, after all, we have other things to worry us."

"Oh," said Shelby, with artful carelessness, "what's become o' Etienne Vaubois? Has he—seen Della yet?"

"I'd be slow—very slow—to say that he had," Ebert replied, with carelessness to match Shelby's own. "But, he *was* in town at the time Della came in, or shortly afterward. . . ."

CHAPTER XIII

Free to Kill

BUT Shelby did not see Vaubois. Clabe Ireland, the fat justice of the peace, he did see. Ireland came into the jail offce. Shelby regarded him sardonically, noting the perspiration that bedewed the judicial countenance in tiny, twinkling beads.

Evidently, Justice Ireland had been told something, by somebody. He waited for Ireland, knowing what he would say.

"How about preliminary hearin' for Gathrie an' the rest?"

"Not ready for it," Shelby drawled. "When we are, we'll send you word. Nice day. See you some more."

Ireland looked furtively sidelong at Sheriff Magee. Observing which, Shelby got up, ostentatiously hitching his gun-belt upward, to loaf over and stare fixedly at Ireland, who tried at first to meet the hard, bright blue eyes.

"I've been lookin' up the record a little," Shelby drawled. "I find that Gathrie has been charged before. But always he's got out on bond. For rustlin'; for horse-stealin'; for attempted murder an' for murder. . . . Always, he's made bond. Always, somethin' happened to witnesses an' complainants, in the past. He downed some cowboy from California, his own state, last month. Cold blood. Two witnesses that didn't like Gathrie an' wouldn't be bluffed by him. He was arrested—gave himself up, that is—an' made bond. The two witnesses disappeared. That day's gone, Ireland!"

Ireland swallowed as the brown face approached closely to his own, then turned away. But at the door he whirled:

"You can't bulldoze me!" he yapped, then vanished.

Shelby came back from supper to find Kent Freeman and Gail with Magee in the sheriff's office, just come from a visit to Gathrie. He looked at them blankly, pulling a curtain of inscrutability over his face. He regarded them as if they were utter strangers and of no interest to him. Kent Freeman stared at Shelby without speaking, but there was calculation in his eyes. Gail stared at the floor after one enigmatic glance at him.

But when Freeman and Magee moved to the door, she lagged behind. At the threshold she turned and came quickly back to where Shelby half-sat, half-leaned upon a table.

"I—I'm sorry!" she said softly. "About—oh, everything! I had no idea that conditions were so terrible in this country. Or that people were—what they seem to be. Shelby . . . are you still considering me as an enemy? I know I've acted like one, as if I had no sense of right or wrong."

"What's the game?" he demanded roughly. "You change too much and too quickly for a plain sort of Ranger to understand you. Are you telling me that you see Rome Gathrie as the same sort of sneaking murderer and thief *I* see him?"

"He's done a lot of things I can't forgive. But he's not so bad as you think him. Shelby . . . Shelby . . ." She put her hands up on his arms. They closed there. He looked down, struck as when first they had opened for him, by the grayness of her wide eyes under dark brows, between long, soft, dark lashes.

"Do you still—like me?" she almost whispered. "I hope so! Because—because I do more than like you—if you make *me* say it! I—Shelby! If I show you the way out of this—the way to a happy ending—will you take it? Rome is the problem. He is the cause of all our trouble, now. Shelby, if Rome were gone clear out of the country—Shelby, you can do that for me—for us. Let him go, tonight!"

"Oh," Shelby grinned. "I *wondered.* Now I understand. All that honeyin' for Rome! I love you an' you love me an' I let Rome go an' then—well, about then my eyes'd be plenty open!"

"You don't understand! Shelby, you don't understand at all. I do love you! I don't know why, but I have, I think, from the moment I saw you. And you—"

"Ne' mind me," he grinned mockingly. "Maybe I was laughin' up my sleeve at you, too. No . . . We won't have any jail deliveries, honey. I'm not so big a fool as I may seem."

She stared incredulously up at him. Suddenly she let go his arms and stepped backward a pace. She stared fixedly at his mocking face.

"You're the biggest fool a man can be!" she flung at him and ran from the office.

He looked after her—no longer grinning.

HE was still standing there, scowling bleakly, when a horse stopped outside the door and a man swung down with creak of saddle-leather and thud of feet in the dust. He heard the man cross the plank sidewalk and come with clink-clump of spur-chains and boot heels, toward the door.

It was a little man, middle-aged, weathered to the color of an old saddle. He walked with the rocking gait of the life-long rider. Inside the doorway he stopped to blink sun-narrowed gray eyes against the light.

"Sheriff?" he inquired, finding Shelby.

"Ranger, Lieutenant Camp," Shelby grunted. From his shirt-pocket he fished a gold badge—gift of Yates Putnam, the Adjutant General. He held it out. The little man studied it.

"Glad to meet you. I'm from Monterey County, California. Parks is my name. Deputy sheriff. I'm the second man out o' Salinas to hit this place. Brick Tulliver was here last month on the same detail an' Brick, we heard—"

"Was shot in a saloon row," Shelby nodded, inspiration coming with the word "California." "Sit down, Parks. Spin your yarn. Maybe I can guess at some of it. An' when you're done—But ne' mind that. Let's hear the tale."

"Tulliver come a-trailin' a man we want mighty bad. We had word he was in this neighborhood an' the' was plenty money to pay for a hunt. Well, we heard from Tulliver once—from Freeman City. He said he'd have news o' the man in a day or two. But the next we heard was from the sheriff here, answerin' our telegrams. He says Brick Tulliver's dead, killed in a saloon row. So the people puttin' up the money, they put me on the job."

"Did Tulliver know an' was he known—by the man he was huntin'?" Shelby asked slowly. A pulse hammered in his neck.

"Know Agosto Fernandes? Shore he did. So do I. He downed my brother makin' a gitaway!"

"Agosto Fernandes. . . . You mean it's a Mexican?"

"You'd never know it," Parks grinned. "He's out o' one o' them old California-Mexican families. Got blue eyes an' yaller hair. He was adopted by an uncle an' it was that uncle he murdered, when the old man caught him robbin' the strongbox one night. Agosto's cousin run into the room an' Agosto cut *him* to ribbons. Then he rode to the next rancho an' kidnapped a girl an' started. We got after him but he shot through our line, an' when we heard next o' him, it was in Los Angeles. He left the girl there."

"Come on back here!" cried Shelby, jumping up.

He snatched the jailer's keys from the nail and unlocked the iron door that led into the jail. The corridor was dimly lit ordinarily. Now it was dark. He hurried along it, moving toward the bracket where hung the oil wall-lamp. There was a rustle, as from the end-cell in which he had seen Rome Gathrie locked. Something struck him with stunning force upon the head, driving him to his knees. Dimly, he heard a half-snarl, half-groan, behind him, where the California deputy had fol-

lowed closely. Hands twitched at his Colt-butt. From far away, it seemed, coming through the haze that enveloped him, there was the thin, high-pitched sound of a woman's scream: "Rome! Rome! Don't stop! Run, Rome!"

A pistol flamed close by him. With the roar of the shot a clublike blow drove consciousness from Shelby.

HE opened his eyes and found a light glaring into them. He blinked and someone shook him roughly.

"Told yuh he wasn't dead!" Booger Tobin yelled.

"Course I'm not dead," Shelby said irascibly and essayed to sit up. "Why would I be dead—" Then he remembered everything. "Gathrie! What happened to him?"

"Flew the coop," Booger shrugged. "Cracked yuh an' the California man on the head with legs they'd yanked off cots. Must have took a shot at yuh, Shelby. But how'd they git keys?"

Shelby got up and looked around. There was Sheriff Magee with his deputies. Ebert was there, too, and Marcus Button, with miscellaneous townsmen he knew only by sight. Parks, the little California deputy, grinned at him. But Shelby was in no mood for grinning. Bad enough to have Rome Gathrie trick him, escape him. But memory of that warning, screamed by Gail Freeman to the outlaw, coming to make him utterly certain that he had been right about her, when she tried to make a fool of him—

"You cut the trail?" he said thickly to Booger. *"Bueno!* For this is end for Agosto Fernandes—for Rome Gathrie. Yeh," he nodded to the gaping Parks. "It was your man who laid us out!"

Happy Overton and Lejeune were outside, forethoughtfully arranging for horses, saddling General Forrest and Booger Tobin's mount. Shelby left them all there, with the beginning of a posse. There was one thing he wanted to do before he started on the trail of Rome Gathrie—Agosto Fernandes. One thing he had an almost mechanical urge to do. He was going to face the girl. He was going to fling at her the real story of her swaggering hero. She had tried to make a fool of him. *Pues,* he could at least show her the sort of fool Fernandes had made of her! He rode upstreet to the hotel hard and narrow of eyes, tight-lipped. He was boiling inside.

Kent Freeman, so the hotel-keeper's wife said, had been a half-hour in bed. Gail, too, had gone to her room, rather more than a half-hour before. Shelby scowled at that news. For she had been at the jail less than thirty minutes ago. Then he saw the door at the far end of the hotel's long hallway. A corner of his hard mouth climbed sardonically. Doubtless she had slipped out of the back door and returned by it.

No answer came to his hammering on the panels of her door. He looked sullenly at it and his fist beat harder upon it. The door of her father's room opened. Kent Freeman stood in the dim light of the hall, glaring at Shelby, who turned to meet him.

"What the hell yuh doin', a-poundin' at my gal's door?" Freeman snarled. He came a step into the hall, barefooted, clothed only in underwear. "I'll—"

"You'd better come here an' make her quit playin' 'possum. I have got some questions to ask her—an' some to ask you. Rome Gathrie—Agosto Fernandes, that is—was handed the cell-key by somebody visitin' him. I'm goin' to find out somethin' about that."

"What d' yuh mean: Agosto Fernandes?" Freeman scowled.

"Get Gail out here! I'll tell you both —mighty quick—about that Mexican murderer!"

Freeman, eyes fixed scowlingly, as much in puzzlement as in irritation, came across to Gail's door. He rapped

on it and called her name several times. No answer came. He rattled the door knob. The door swung back. He put his head through the crack:

"Honey. Gail, honey, this blame' Ranger—"

He stepped suddenly inside. Shelby heard his surprised oath. He followed. In the moonlight from the window the bed showed smooth. It had not been slept in. He scratched a match. Not a sign of occupancy. He and Freeman stood staring.

"But she—she went to bed," the old man said stupidly.

ABRUPTLY, Shelby told Freeman of the coming of Parks, the deputy from Salinas; of the tale Parks brought; and of the attack in the jail corridor. Freeman's mouth sagged.

"I—I knowed he was a salty customer," he said as if but thinking aloud.

"He come in when I was havin' plenty trouble an'—an'—" he checked himself quickly, to look suspiciously at Shelby. Then his seamed, brown face hardened angrily: "But what's all that got to do with my gal? She never give him a key!"

"As I dropped there in the corridor, she was yellin' for him to come runnin' —make a getaway!" Shelby snarled at him. "If she wasn't party to the deal, what was she doin' there, so handy the minute it happened? I'll tell you somethin' else! You want to know where she is now? She's with that sneakin' murderer you've been pettin' an' runnin' with! That's where she went!"

"Ah, no!" Freeman cried. But his face worked. He looked years older. "Not—not with that— Look here. We —we can find her! Likely, yuh was mistaken about her yellin' to him. That lick on yo' head— Come on! We'll find her in town."

But they did not. Freeman, finding a half-dozen F-Anchor cowboys in the saloons, set them to combing the town. But before they came to the courthouse to report no luck, Shelby had found a Mexican youngster who had seen the party ride away from the jail—three men and a girl. He had got but one brief glimpse of her, among the men. But undoubtedly it was a girl.

"I'm goin' with yuh!" Freeman told Shelby grimly. "Me an' my boys, yere. An' when we come up to that Mexican—"

They rode out of town in the moonlight, Booger Tobin in the van, following the plain trail of five horses by light of the moon upon the trail floor. Straight toward the Rio Amarillo and the Feliz it led, for a mile, two miles, three. Then it vanished on hard and rocky ground.

"Well," Booger grunted, "anyhow, we know which way they was headin' an' we ought to know the road by this time, Shelby."

"Let's git goin'," Freeman cried exasperatedly and pushed forward. "They aim to make the Diamon'-G an', likely, pick up grub an' hit the trail from the'. We're wastin' time."

But Shelby sat General Forrest and scowled at the ground, wondering. There was one thing he had learned by bitter experience and that was the danger of taking anything for granted. He guessed that Glenn Yoakum had been added to Gathrie's party on the edge of town, and that somewhat altered everything. He was certain, by now, that Yoakum had tried to get hold of Gail, that day on the trail. Now, if Yoakum rode with that party, with Gail along as Gathrie's property, what would Yoakum do? He was said not to be at all afraid of Gathrie.

"Not so fast!" he cried suddenly. "The more speed we make here, the slower we'll maybe go later on. We're just guessin' that they're headin' for the Feliz. I want to know that they're not

foolin' us. Booger! Happy! Lejeune! Parks! Let's scatter out an' see if we can cut their trail."

They scattered as indicated by wave of his arm. Freeman swore, then checked his impulsive movement forward and went with the rest of them, leaning from the saddle to stare for faintest sign. Shelby got off after a half-hour of fruitless searching. He was off to the west of the place where they had first halted, moving slowly in that direction. Suddenly, he squatted to see better. He straightened, gaping incredulously, then moved on. Within fifty yards, there was no doubt that he followed the five horses—heading back toward Freeman City

His six-shooter jumped from the holster. He fired three rapid shots, then swung up again and reloaded empty chambers. The others came down upon him at a racing gallop. Booger leaned to stare, then shook his head and regarded Shelby helplessly.

"Yuh always had that somethin' in yo' head! Doubled back on us, huh? Well, let's git goin'."

CHAPTER XIV

Gunflash Range

THEY were perhaps a mile from town's edge when to them across the distance between came faint, heavy, the muffled roar of a heavy explosion. Without a word, Shelby rammed the hooks to General Forrest. He led the way at a pounding gallop with the posse's twenty-odd strung out behind him. As they came closer to Freeman City they heard the ragged sounds of firing. The rattle seemed to become heavier, to spread to right and left ahead.

At last they were all but on the edge of the county seat. Out from it burst a knot of horsemen. They, too, were at mad gallop. Shelby yelled furiously and in his rear, obeying yell and hand-motions, the posse spread fanwise and the semi-circle swept forward to envelope the other party. But these saw and pulled in. There was a defiant yell from them and what had been a close mass of riders became two bunches, eight or nine or ten men in each, deploying raggedly to right and left. None, Shelby noted swiftly, turned back toward town.

The posse also split. Shelby found himself riding at insane speed across the fairly level ground. There was not a horse behind him with General Forrest's speed. He drew up on the fugitives and these began to turn in the saddle and shoot at him. Lead sang both ways, for the possemen, also, were shooting. Desperately, Shelby looked for Gail Freeman in that straggling group ahead. When he did not find her, he was at once pleased and angry. She was not in danger here, but that meant Gathrie was in the other bunch, going the other way.

He pulled in, abruptly; flung out of the saddle. Booger Tobin slid his horse to a stop beside him. They opened up with carbines while the possemen swerved off to the side out of the line of fire. Horses and men went down under the methodical deadliness of that hail of shredding lead. When the remnant—three men, only—were out of range, Shelby and Booger swung up again. General Forrest had his wind back. Shelby left Booger ahead; pulled up abreast of the possemen; drew ahead of them. This time he did not pause, but went grimly after the fugitives. Foot by foot, he overhauled them.

A hundred yards—then seventy-five—fifty—and there was Rome Gathrie, well in advance of all others, riding magnificently upon a big black. Shel-

by's mouth tightened. He grunted to General Forrest and the space between him and the man in the drag of the outlaws shrank. That man turned a twisted, desperate face over-shoulder. The Colt in his hand jumped up. Shelby pulled his own gun. As his horse landed at the end of a jump, he snatched that tiny space of steadiness; fired; missed. But so did the other. And the second and third shots Shelby fired were not misses. The man slumped in the saddle; fell off sideway; was all but trampled by General Forrest.

Two more ahead—Rome Gathrie and Slats. Shelby yelled at them to surrender. Slats twitched in the saddle at the shrill, fierce sound. For an instant he glared at Shelby, seemed to mark the decreasing space between, then let his gun drop. His hands went up; his horse swung around and he rode back toward the line of the posse. Shelby hardly looked. He rode on after Gathrie. . . .

Gathrie looked back. They were a hundred yards ahead of Booger Tobin, nearest of those who followed. Shelby grinned fiercely. Here was trail's end for one of them!

"All up—you dirty murderer! Agosto Fernandes!"

Twenty yards apart, they were now. Gathrie swerved his black, abruptly; he came about in a short circle, handling that big animal as if it had been a mere circus-pony, the Colts he had out lifting. In the moonlight his face was like stone.

Shelby, too, prided himself upon horsemanship. He spun General Forrest about in circle to round Gathrie. When the big Mexican fired, he fired, also, feeling the wind of the lead upon his face. But he fired at the horse, the bigger target. Fired the two remaining shots and saw the black fall, then—as Gathrie went out of the saddle to turn a complete somersault in air and come down upon his feet—Shelby dropped the empty six-shooter and whipped the short Colt from his shoulder-holster.

GATHRIE stumbled and came to his knees. His face was a mask of deadly concentration. Shelby snarled at him, though he knew that Gathrie—Fernandes—would not surrender. The answer was a shot that burned between his left arm and side; a searing pain that made Shelby twitch and miss his own shot. He steadied himself. He leaned a little from the saddle and fired downward, knowing that something slapped his hat-crown and took the Stetson from his head.

The advantage was with the man on the ground but there was no time to consider that. Shelby emptied the Colt and rammed the hooks to General Forrest. He swept by Gathrie who was still on one knee; still holding a Colt in each hand. Nothing about Gathrie to tell that he had been hit at all, by that blaze of shots Shelby had poured at him.

"Funny! If he got me at the same time I got him!" Shelby thought, vaguely. There was no feeling left in his body. Just cold automatic action.

Then he was abreast of Booger Tobin. Booger's dark thin face was alight with battle-lust. He had a Colt out. He glared at Shelby—who reached across and took the pistol from him.

"Kill that—son of Satan!" he said quickly. What he was thinking was: "He wins, anyhow. I can kill him, but she went with him. I never had a chance with her, against him."

He whirled General Forrest. It had all taken only a minute. Gathrie was still on one knee. But he had turned a little. Both Colts were pointed at Shelby. They looked rock-steady. Shelby rammed the hooks to General Forrest. The tall horse jumped. Down on Gathrie Shelby charged. He heard Gathrie's shots. Then he was over Gathrie. He leaned down and fired point-

blank. Gathrie fell forward. Shelby reined in to look grimly down at the dead man.

"Yuh got him!" Booger yelled. The possemen, coming up with Slats among them, echoed the yell.

Shelby turned without answering. He went at a long lope, back toward town. Before he came up to that place where the race had begun, he saw stragglers on their way from chasing the other half of Gathrie's bunch.

"Three of 'em got away," Kent Freeman said dully. "We got a bunch o' money off them we killed. Reckon they'd robbed the bank. Money was in bank sacks. But my baby, she wasn't with that bunch. Yuh never found her, neither. I could tell. . . ."

"What could have become o' her? Reckon she was left in town? Got separated from 'em?"

They loped on into Freeman and were hardly in the street before Marcus Button and Judge Ebert appeared from the door of the bank. They ran into the street. Others came crowding out to their stirrups.

"They came back in very quietly," Ebert explained. "They must have gathered up the remnant of the gang, Lieutenant, then marched boldly over to blow the bank-safe. We armed hurriedly—a bunch of us—and opened on them. But they were fighting a rear-guard action. They had the loot and were gettting away when we started the battle. You met them?"

"All but two are wiped out. Where was your noble sheriff?"

"Forgot to tell yuh," said Freeman. "Magee an' his two dep'ties was in that bunch we follered. None o' them got away. . . ."

"Good riddance," Button snarled, "Gathrie? He gone?"

"I killed him," Shelby nodded tonelessly. "Anybody see Gail Freeman?"

Nobody had. Nor was a second search of the town any more successful than the first. Nobody in the town felt like sleeping. Everybody felt like buying drinks. Shelby wandered moodily from one bar to another, refusing drinks. The slate was clean, so far as his job was concerned, here. The thieves and outlaws of the Rio Amarillo country were either dead or on the run. Their leader was dead. Freeman was not likely, ever again, to try to build his strength by the use of such as Gathrie. It was hard to call Fernandes anything but that.

BUT he kept seeing a picture—one that had nothing to do with cleaning up this lawless land. It was a clear oval face with wide gray eyes under darkest of long, curling lashes! He swore dispiritedly underbreath. Where was she now? What had Gathrie done with her, during the attack on the bank? Glenn Yoakum—He stiffened.

He found two of the possemen who had fought that bunch. And, checking with them, he could only believe that, if Yoakum had been with Gathrie, he had been one of the three who had escaped. He went silently out of the saloon. He found General Forrest in Button's corral. He slapped the thick neck:

"You have got more work to do, *caballo!* If you're tired, you have got to forget it."

He saddled and rode out, back toward the battle-scene. He turned as that second bunch had turned. The bodies had been carried into town. He passed dead horses. He rode by the last place where fighting had been done. He followed while the moonlight lasted and rode on after that by merely going straight ahead as the three runaways had pointed.

An hour passed as he jogged through darkness; a second. He was not sleepy. He was thinking. Suddenly, he pulled in. An iron-shod hoof had clinked

against a rock somewhere out there in the night. He stiffened with hand on pistol. Again the clink—this time followed by an impatient order.

"Gail! Gail!" Shelby cried incredulously. "This is Shelby, Gail!"

"All right, General. I believe you," the girl answered—and even as he loped toward her Shelby found time to consider her tone, its calmness, its—lack of interest, almost.

"You—you're not hurt?" he said shakily, reining in beside the dark bulk of her horse and bending to her.

"Not a scratch, General. My horse is tender-footed and he's been stumbling. Ready? I'm going to town."

He followed. Twice he started to say something, ask something. Twice he checked himself. After all, what was there he could say—that made any difference? So they rode silently, until the eastern horizon showed faint gray instead of black. Presently, he could see her face dimly. She turned:

"Did you simply have luck, or did you guess what was being done? I know that you and the posse rode up just as they came riding out. Was there a fight?"

"Sort o'. They split in two bunches. So did we. Three o' Fernandes' gang got away. That was all."

"He? Was *he* one of the three?"

"You're a cold-blooded little devil!" he burst out. "*Dios* knows I hated him as I never hated anybody else, but you—"

"Never mind me, General," she told him evenly. "Did he—"

"He didn't! I told him at Jericho—at the hotel—that I'd kill him, an' kill him I did."

The eastern sky was rose-flushed, now. There was light to see her face clearly. It was very tired, belying the near-flippancy of the tone she had used toward him; very pale and set. She stared at the dawn-colors.

"Queer! There was a time when I thought he was all a girl could ask for. . . . I was madly in love with him. Then you came and I didn't believe the things you said about him. But I wondered. And when I asked him, I began to wonder more. Then that murder at the Circles—and he took Della to the Diamond-G. . . . I began to despise him, then—"

"But you helped him break jail! You wanted me to let him go!" Shelby cried angrily.

"I didn't help him," she denied levelly—and indifferently. "The jailor probably gave him the cell-key. But I was going to help him—even after I heard that Salinas deputy tell his story. I suppose a girl can't bear the idea of letting the man who has loved her get hanged. I never wanted to see him again, but I certainly wanted him to get away—clear away."

"Why did you *go* with him, then?"

"I was right," she said mockingly. "I said that you were the biggest fool a man could be, and you are. I went because he and Glenn Yoakum made me. They kept me at the edge of town, with one man to watch me, while they robbed the bank. But as they came back, toward where I was held, you appeared. My guard took me down the arroyo hell-bent, heading for the Feliz. We couldn't go so fast because of my horse. Then, an hour or so before you met me, his horse fell with him. I didn't wait to see the result. I started for town!"

"I—I am all the fool that you called me," he added. "But still, what you told me in the jail when you wanted me to let him go—I couldn't believe that. I—Oh, maybe because it was too good to be true. But partly because I've been so crazy jealous of him ever since I saw you. Gail!"

She held him back with hand uplifted.

"Don't. What was true, then, isn't

true any more. I feel a hundred years older, now. And I know that I don't care a thing about any man in the world, nor ever will again."

"You mean that it *was* true? An' you're tryin' to tell me you could love me one day an' not the next?"

"Exactly! I don't try to explain it—"

THEY topped over a hogback and began to slide downhill. From out of a thick clump of chaparral came a shot. A slug caught Shelby in the shoulder and drove him backward as if it were a hammer-blow. Mechanically, he snatched at his Colt. There was a second shot, then he straightened desperately, with the sound of Gail's scream in his ears. He swayed far forward, over the horn. He roweled General Forrest savagely and the big horse grunted, then leaped for the chaparral. There were other shots, but he was a poor target. He found the stiff branches slapping his face; then he was all but against Glenn Yoakum and letting the hammer drop. He thumbed it back and rammed the muzzle against Yoakum's body. Yoakum pulled or fell away. Shelby leaned far over to send the third slug into him. Yoakum was on the ground, then still.

Shelby turned his horse and pushed out of the thicket, swaying in the saddle drunkenly. He saw Gail as through a haze. He clung to the saddle-horn. Then vaguely he felt her arm about him.

"Shelby! Shelby!" she was calling.

"I'm goin'—to cash in," he said. "Before I— do, will you tell me—if it was truth—about lovin' me one day—an' not the next? Or was it—foolishness?"

"It was worse! It was plain lying! I do love you. You aren't going to die. You *mustn't* die!"

"A' right, then, I won't!" he grinned—if twistedly. "If we can stop the blood in this hole an' I can get a drink out o' my saddle-pocket—"

Presently, he was bandaged and they moved side by side toward town again.

"I was going to make you wonder—and worry," she said after a while. "And then Glenn—"

"He was a rattler," Shelby nodded grimly. "But about the other—honey, I'm beginnin' to feel weak—you better put your arm around me—I'm about to fall. . . ."

"I think you're lying!" she said indignantly. "But—"

She put her arm around him and he leaned, grinning; leaned farther, until his face was against hers; until his mouth was against hers. His good arm went around her. He held her there for a measured hundred yards. She pulled free.

"What a lovely morning!" she cried suddenly, staring ahead. "I—I hadn't noticed it!"

Neither had he!

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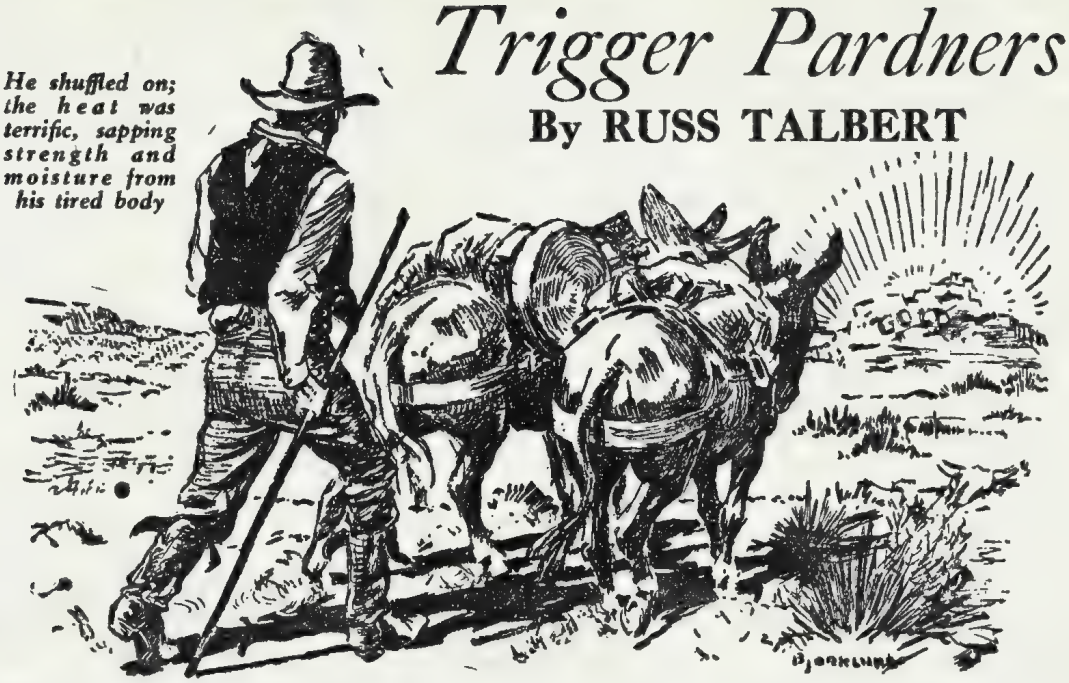

He shuffled on; the heat was terrific, sapping strength and moisture from his tired body

A tired old desert-rat is apt to covet five-thousand dead-or-alive reward—even if the blood-bounty fugitive happens to be his old saddle-pard!

TOM WISE—"Tuolumne" Tom, the sobriquet dating almost forty years, back to the time when he began his lifelong hunt for gold in the Sierra—sat on his little vine-covered porch, looking across the fertile valley at the range. Under the sun the peaks were amber, veined with amethyst in the fissures. Forest mantled it from its great shoulders to the foothills. Back of it lay the desert, his desert.

He could almost smell the sunbaked sand, the alkali flats, the scanty sage, columnar chayas, thickets of prickly pear in vivid bloom, the sprawling Dead Men's Fingers where the lizards darted. Two score years of traveling old, faint trails and breaking new ones, seeking the pot of gold at the foot of rainbow-hued mountains; had made a desert-rat of him, although he was now snug in his own neat cabin—nearly his own—secure with an annuity, removed from the haunting destitution of old age. But the lure of it all, the risk and the adventure, the never failing hope of discovery, burned yet within his spirit. His two burros, Jack and Jenny, who had not borne pack for three years, grazed contentedly in their shadow, but Tuolumne Tom had heels that itched for the scrunch of sand, calloused palms that itched for the feel of prospector-hammer, pick, shovel and pan.

From within came sounds of ardent housecleaning. The whisk of a broom, the clatter of pans and the clink of dishes, the smell of suds. There were signs of it on the porch where furniture that interfered with the task had been set, together with Tom. Martha Somers, his widowed sister, was at it again. She was always at it.

There were times when he sighed for the solitude of a mountain shack where the woodrats would run along the stringers and peer at him cooking sowbelly and beans, smoking his pipe, comfortable in his rough housekeeping with none to chide him. Martha was a good woman—one of the speckless, respectable sort. But what was the use of a house where you couldn't take your ease, where you were always picked on for putting down a pipe so that the ashes fell out of it, for having dust on

your boots, for opening the collar of your shirt on a hot day, because your nails didn't look as if they had been properly dug out, for your hair not being slick or for grease spots on your clothes?

Then she was always hinting about the three thousand dollars of insurance money she had used to buy the cabin-bungalow, she called it. Her nephew had a gas station and repair shop on the State road. If she opened up a refreshment counter in connection, home cooking only, with a restroom for ladies, she believed—and she was probably right—that she would make money. But her "duty" was with Tom. It had seemed a fine thing to put the three thousand dollars against his annuity money, a hundred dollars a month, of which he handed over to her twenty dollars a week for living expenses, reserving the rest for taxes, tobacco money and personal sundries; but somehow it hadn't worked out just the way he thought it would. And she harped on the three thousand dollars until they sounded at times like three thousand jangling, discordant strings.

His pipe was out and he refilled it methodically, automatically knocking out the ashes on the porch and then hastily brushing them off with his bandanna handkerchief. It had been a neckerchief once, worn as a filter against choking alkaline dust, fine as flour, against windstorms of the desert and the dancing dervishes of sand that sarabanded on the floors of the Sinks.

HE fumbled for a match. He had none. To go in was to invoke trouble. He would be soiling the fresh-scrubbed floor, or smoking too much. The mailman would be coming presently and he could get one from him. He sighed a little, the stem of the unlit pipe still between his teeth, musing.

Sandy McNaughton, with whom he had sought for seven years in the lonely ranges and over desert sands, looking for float, finding it, and not finding it; weathered rock that you could crumble between strong fingers and pan out until the gold showed like specks of butter in the churn; gleaming quartz with stringers of the precious metal; placer gold in stream beds long since dry; pockets in the wash.

They had quarreled perpetually, stubborn, fertile in epithet. They had starved together and raised merry hell in the mining camps after a strike. They had played cribbage at the campfire, faced death. And fought continually.

Now and then there had been finds. Then the trip to the nearest camp, first to hire a room or, preferably, a small cabin, after they had attended to the burros. Next the purchase of grub, fodder, perhaps a new shirt or overalls or boots. Dynamite for riving stubborn rocks, new tools or a fresh skillet. He had always hated new skillets. He had an old one now in the woodshed with his outfit; caked and flaked on the bottom, its cooking surface smooth with sand scouring, impregnated with the flavor of a thousand meals that helped the latest. Martha always scrubbed them top and bottom.

Then to line up at the Happy Strike bar, to shout drinks for the house. Cheery carousal, telling of tales, prophecies of fortune and what they would do when they struck it really rich. Sandy telling how he would buy him a big house with twenty bathrooms, to set all the taps running at once—and let them run. Desert music.

Bucking the faro layout. Broke, but with their grubstake provided for, setting out again for the lottery of the sands. Growling at each other while the patient, squaw-hitched burros plodded on, used to the vituperation, expectant of it, going the better for it.

Sometimes they would come back flat broke and then there would come a talk with Peter Menzies, dubbed by Sandy the "Human Wart." Scotch, and careful, doling them out his stale stock parsimoniously for a half-share of their finds, making the act a charity, waiting always to see he got his last grain of the strike.

Peter was rich now. The arid valley of the mining camp had come under water and Menzies, loaded with mortgage deeds, was head of the Mariposa Investment and Irrigation Projects, disliked and feared, and proud of it; remote and stingy as ever, church-going and interest-grabbing.

Seventy-six dollars! The old bone of contention that had slain Sandy's and his partnership in Philistian fashion, as with the jawbone of an ass.

Sandy had done the buying that trip. Seventy-six dollars was Tom's share of it. He had paid it over before they went to the Happy Strike. No doubt of that. He remembered counting it out, fishing up a silver dollar to make the exact amount. Then had come a gradual, blissful oblivion that ended in their bunks, all their money spent, but their grub bought ready for the next trip, aching heads, sour stomachs and sandpapered dispositions.

"Where's thet seventy-six dollars you owe me? You ain't gone an' spent my money, hev' you, you derned, bowlegged, cross-grained, slab-sided chuckawaller?"

"Joshua an' the prophets!" He could hear Sandy, see him lying in the bunk, dressed but for his boots, as clearly as if some television had projected sight and speech on the air above the valley. He had never been able to convince Sandy of the payment. He had referred to it in every later argument—bad as Martha, with her precious three thousand. It had been the text of his last words as they split company on the barren buttress of Esquelito Peak—four years ago.

TOM had wanted to go to a former prospect, uncovered by Sandy, that was not far away and which he believed promising.

"You'd see gold in a brass-foundry, you wall-eyed cross between a horntoad an' a sidewinder! You kin go if you want to, but not me. I'm sick of yore yap, an' the sight of ye! There ain't anywater night there an' the rock is nothin' but weathered blue porph'ry. If you was huntin' di-monds, you'd go to a coalyard. You ain't got no more gold-sense than a Chihuahua hairless purp knows erbout pointin' quail."

This wasn't true. Out of the eight good strikes they had made, Tom had located six. He said so, lucidly and luridly. They had parted company, then and there.

"An' don't fergit you owe me seventy-six bucks!" That was the parting greeting, shouted up the slope.

Tom had been right. Twenty thousand odd dollars had been sweated from the weathered dyke of blue prophyry, thrust up amid the turmoil of twisted strata on Esquelito Peak, named from the skeleton of a prospector found there.

He had found where Sandy was and sent him his half, through the Express Company. After all, it was Sandy's strike. Tom still had the brief acknowledgement in his wallet. Last souvenir of Sandy and the old days.

This is a reseat for the money you sent me. Ten thousand two hundred and eleven dollars. I suppose you took out the essayin' an' smelting. When you pay me the seventy-six dollars you done me out of, there'll be a cleen slate between us.

Sandy McNaughton.

Poco Agua, March 3, 192—.

His own share awed Tom. He had never had so much money at one time. Nothing like it. He was a capitalist! He had had a hard time on Esquelito Peak, a touch of sunstroke that almost finished him, too little water—and that bitter. He felt his years for the first time, though he was only sixty-three. He spent a little and then saw the annuity agent. Now he was set. He could get along without the cabin. He wished Martha would sell it—she had had offers. There were plenty of abandoned shacks, near springs, where he could flip his greasy pancakes in peace and not have to bother over matches.

The mailman was coming. He could see his "sign" of dust down the road where the battered flivver stopped at the mail-boxes. But Tom prepared to meet the man. He liked to chat with him, and he wanted a match.

A letter for Martha. From her nephew. By marriage. Not his, her late husband's brother's boy. SOMERS' GARAGE — NEWVILLE — WE CAN FIX IT blazoned on the envelope corner in scarlet. A red-headed rustler. Martha might run her restaurant but she wouldn't run young Eddy. Not far or into a corner.

For Tom, a circular advertising buckleless harness. A check from the annuity company. He hadn't expected that until tomorrow, and he put it carefully away.

His newspaper. Not the local one, but published in Mariposa. In the moment of bibulous recklessness he had paid for a five-year subscription and he still liked to read the news, occasionally seeing a name he remembered, though it was a prosperous ranchers' journal now, not a mining camp rag.

BEFORE he opened it he took the letter up to Martha, handed it through the screen door. She sniffed at it.

"Close the door! For goodness' sake, do you want to fill the house with flies after I've shoo'ed them all out? I never saw such a man."

"I wish you never had," muttered Tom. He did not actually mean that. He was fond of his sister, fondest when they were furthest apart. And he had his news sheets and the book of paper matches the mailman had given him. He went back to the steps. Her attack had driven all thought of the annuity check out of his mind for the moment.

He went back to the porch steps and tore the wrapper from the paper. His sight, once keen as a hawk, still good for distance, could no longer distinguish news print or even ordinary writing. But the headlines were plain enough and they flashed up at him from the first page of the Mariposa *Mercury* in double-column display. The *Mercury* was hardly metropolitan in makeup, but it knew how to make the most of a sensation.

CAPITALIST NEAR DEATH

PETER MENZIES ATTACKED BY DISGRUNTLED PROSPECTOR

PRESIDENT OF MARIPOSA REALTY COMPANY SHOT IN HIS OFFICE

ASSAILANT ESCAPES ON STOLEN HORSE. POSSES IN PURSUIT.

He felt for his glasses, wiped them off, excited. Peter Menzies!

HE had a hunch who the disgruntled prospector was and he read eagerly:

Peter Menzies, Capitalist, President of the Mariposa Irrigation and Realty Company, respected and influential citizen of this community, who has done more, perhaps, than any other man towards its development; was

shot and possibly fatally wounded in his private office late yesterday afternoon by Sandy McNaughton, a dissolute "desert-rat" type of prospector, after he had refused the latter money for a grubstake. The man made his escape by stealing the horse of William Sesnon, cantaloupe grower, in town to superintend shipment, who had left his horse hitched outside the Menzies Block.

It was Sandy! Tom read on.

Full details of the attack are not available. Florence Reid, secretary to Mr. Menzies, was in the next room at the time. She made the following statement to Chief of Police Dutton and later to Sheriff Pelham, who promptly organized posses to overtake the would be murderer, believed to have fled to Death Valley.

"The man has been several times to see Mr. Menzies. On more than one occasion he gave him money. The last time was about four months ago when Mr. Menzies refused to give him any more. There were high words and Mr. Menzies turned him out of the office and gave me orders not to admit him again. He said that he had assisted the man from charity, as he had known him for a long time, but that he was an irresponsible character and should not be encouraged."

"I kin read between *them* lines," Tom commented. "I reckon Menzies has a mortgage on the *Mercury* outfit. Respected citizen, eh? Giving money out of charity! Huh! Sandy didn't make good with the last grubstake he give him so he closed down. He would, the old curmudgeon!"

"He came back yesterday afternoon. He had been drinking. I tried to prevent him seeing Mr. Menzies but he brushed by me and went in the private office. I could hear loud words. Threatening. Then the voice quieted down and I went back to my typing. I had no doubt but that Mr. Menzies could handle him. I heard a shot. Then the door from Mr. Menzies' office into the corridor slam. It was locked from the inside. I went in and found Mr. Menzies on the floor, senseless, with a wound in his chest. I tried to revive him for a minute and then I notified the police and called Dr. Grayson."

"I'll bet Sandy called him plenty," said Tom aloud. "He refused us one time after we didn't make a strike, but we came through the next trip on our own, though we didn't hev' to. He never put up more'n fifty dollars in goods when he had the store an' he's had thousands back agen."

The office of Mr. Menzies is on the second floor. It would appear that McNaughton, who is a disreputable character, known for his quarrelsome disposition; unlocked the door into the corridor after firing the probably fatal shot and ran down the stairs. His pack burros were outside but he leaped into the saddle of William Sesnon's bay horse and galloped out of town, making for the desert. The horse was found later by the sheriff's posse, abandoned. The trail was traced for some distance but lost on hard rock. Sheriff Pelham is certain that he has taken refuge in Death Valley where he has prospected for several years. Some four years ago he apparently made a strike, exhibiting several thousand dollars which he spent recklessly. His full description has been broadcast and all towns and camps directly notified. It is thought he realized that the horse could not stand a desert trip, having probably been pushed to its limit, still blown when found.

He has no equipment and it is certain he cannot long remain hidden in the desert ranges. The railroad is being watched. Walker Lake District has been alarmed. The Mariposa Realty Company has offered a reward of five thousand dollars for his apprehension, or information leading thereto. Posters are already being distributed with a heading DEAD or ALIVE.

Mr. Menzies was taken to the Mariposa Hospital and placed in a private room. His age, the shock, and the nature of the wound, are against his re-

covery. Dr. Grayson is hopeful, but has not yet attempted to remove the bullet and fears internal hemorrhages. The audacity of the crime has shocked the community and it is trusted that the attacker will be speedily delivered over to justice to pay the penalty of his dastardly deed.

"FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS — for Old Sandy! Dead or Alive! Offered by the Mariposa Realty Company, of which Menzies was president and a heavy majority stockholder."

"If he starts to git well, an' he's a tough old bird," thought Tom, "he'll pull down thet reward *pronto*. Most of it 'ud come out of his pocket. But he'll sick on the sheriff. Thet costs the county, not Pete Menzies. Comes dern near ownin' Pelham, I'll bet. An', if there's any fat mortgages to be foreclosed, he'll live till he collects 'em. Thet 'ud save Sandy from the gallows, but he'd hev' to serve time. Five-thousand dollars! That's quite a sum."

"I'll bet I know where he is, the old coyote. Up between Solo an' Diablo Peaks where we found thet li'l' spring one time. Last place in the world you'd look fer water, or a man ter hide. They're right, he'll hev' to come out sooner or later, an' they'll ketch him. Bound to. He might shoot a rock rabbit or so, but they're scarey. Yes sir, he'll hev' to come out. Bin' there four days now. Might hold out a week. An' he's there, right enough. If he had his outfit he c'ud sneak out of the range nights. He knows it like a book. Drop down inter Nevady, work south, git ercross the line, mebbe. Hide out days. But he's got to hev' grub an' water. They'll be watchin' all the springs an' waterholes. Five thousand is a heap of money!"

It would pay off Martha, it would purchase him twenty-five dollars a month more annuity, as well. Or he could get the radio he wanted.

To possess a radio had become almost an obsession with him because of a happy phrase the astute agent had used who tried to sell him one. "Prospecting the air." It had particularly appealed to Tom. To sit nights, getting in touch with distant places, foreign places, hearing the news, the speeches of the President and notable orators on vital questions. Music, conjured like magic out of space. But he could not afford it.

He sat for a while musing, seeing plainly the gaunt figure of Sandy McNaughton, fugitive, with five thousand dollars on his head. Dead or Alive! Crouching amid the burned-out rocks beside the little spring that barely oozed up a pailful of water every twenty-four hours, ravenously eating rock-rabbits, rattlesnakes, fearful of the shadow of a hawk or a buzzard. What if they sent an airplane scouting for him?

"They'll git him, sooner or later," he muttered. "An' someon 'll collect five thousand dollars!"

He could imagine how cranky Sandy had become in the face of misfortune. He had known many such, old desert-rats with their hopes seared, their power failing, talking to themselves as they plodded on the everlasting search, not so much for riches, as in their youth, but for some provision, however meager, for their old age, coming so swiftly on."

"I was sure lucky," he told himself. "Might hev' chucked it erway, like Sandy did. I'm good mebbe fer another trip or so, but not many. He remembered that stroke of the sun, the skeleton of the perished prospector on Esquelito Peak, his failing sight, a recent touch of rheumatism, a growing stiffness in his joints. "Sure lucky!" he repeated.

Martha called him for dinner. Cleaning-day meals were cold snacks culled from icebox left-overs.

"You ain't shaved this morning," she upbraided him. "I'm not goin' to sit down to meals with a tramp."

"I asked you fer hot water an' you said you couldn't spare any."

"Your skin too tender to use cold? You're always talkin' about your roughin' it."

"I wear a beard when I'm prospectin'," he mumbled, taking the jug of hot water she handed him.

"I've had a letter from Eddy," she said, when they were nearly through. "He's doin' fine an' could do better. More traffic on the road every day an' he's got a prime location. He could treble his profits, he says, if he could get him a wrecking car with a derrick on it to bring in jobs. Plenty of accidents in Pinos Curve, an' Waite, over to Junction City, gets all those. He wants to borrow fifteen hundred dollars."

"From you?"

"The bank 'ud loan it to him if he could get another name to endorse a note."

"You could mortgage this house, it's in your name," said Tom. "Put it up as bank security. Or you could sell it easy enough fer more'n you paid fer it. Go in with Eddy as a pardner, start the tea-room."

SHE looked across the table with offended dignity.

"I trust I know my duty to my own flesh an' blood, Tom Wise. Eddy's a fine boy an' I'm fond of him, an' proud of him. He deserves to be helped, but he's no kin to me. An' you are. I've put my money in this bungalow for a good purpose an' I intend to keep to that purpose. But I'm goin' over to see Eddy. I'll catch the mailman as he comes back, an' take the stage at Junction City at four o'clock. I'll stay with his folks. Mrs. Somers 'n' me always got on well together. She's often asked me to stay with them. I'll be back late tomorrow. You can make out, batchin' for once. I'll talk things over with him. Maybe the bank'll take my name without a mortgage, seeing I've got property."

"Mebbe," said Tom. "I kin git erlong all right."

If Eddy's prospects failed to materialize, the bank would call the note and the bungalow would be the only available asset of Martha's, just the same, but her feminine financiering did not see it that way and there was no use in starting an argument. It would be one-sided and she might lose the mailman's return trip.

He helped her into the flivver finally, submitting to a last series of instructions. Then he went back into the house, lit his pipe and took the annuity check. But the figures on it seemed transmuted to a higher amount. Five thousand dollars. Pay to the order of Thomas Wise, five thousand dollars!

If he had that he could pay her back the three thousand, keep the bungalow or sell it, be a free man once more, still with his annuity, with an increase, or with savings and a radio. A radio would work just as well in a mountain shack. He had in mind a gorge in the Kern River Canyons, where the stream rushed below towering cliffs that rivaled those of Yosemite, where there were grassy glades and trees, where birds sang and trout flashed. A hermit's solitude. Off the beaten trails, even of the Sierra Club. A man had to pack in to that ravine. But the radio would be his Aladdin's lamp.

His eyes took on purpose. Presently he rose and went to the woodshed. There his packsaddles were swung up out of the reach of rats, with his blankets. His tools and cooking utensils were in one corner, ready for use. He didn't have much time. Sandy might get starved into making a break

for it. Best to ship the burros and packs to Five Springs. No sense in going to Mariposa. Not much chance of anyone recognizing him without his beard as the old pardner of the fugitive, not even Peter Menzies, but he would save time by getting off at Five Springs. That much nearer Solo and Diablo Peaks. And he could buy his grub there.

He walked down to the store and changed his check, buying some plug and finecut for chewing and smoking tobacco. Nothing like chewing to hold off thirst, to prevent cracked lips. He telephoned the depot and made arrangements to ship Jack and Jenny on an early freight that would get them there almost as soon as he did. He'd pack at the bungalow and walk to the railroad after midnight. Help get him in shape. There was a stiff trail ahead of him.

At dawn he arrived at the station, unpacked his burros and saw to their shipment and comfort. He had a little money saved up that he brought with him, besides the hundred from the check. The agent looked at his old but sturdy figure, equipped for the trip, high boots, worn but sufficient, wooden, shiny-handled Colt in holster, cartridge belt, sun-bleached Stetson.

"Figgerin' on a trip? Prospectin'?" the agent asked.

"You might call it thet." Tom cut off a corner of his plug and put it in his cheek, masticating as he spoke. It was with a drawl but it was purposeful. He seemed a different man from the one out-seated on the porch steps, fumbling for a match. He was efficient, masterful, his mouth firm and his puckered eyes steady.

"Ain't aimin' to shoot anyone with thet cannon?"

"Not unless I hev' to."

The agent laughed but Tom's face was grave.

THIRTY-SIX hours later he was traveling a dry wash that led down into Death Valley, striking north and east to avoid the Borax plant and its spur, making for where the peaks of Solo and Diablo showed blue shadows against a sky hardly less blue. Dust clouded up behind him and his two well laden burros who walked behind him, docile, used to his work.

An hour later he saw sky-sign. A cloud, that revealed five riders, a deputy-sheriff and four men of his posse, armed with pistols and high-powered rifles. They halted him and he looked at them mildly.

"Where you from?"

"Come in at Five Springs. Goin' inter the Panamints. Got an old prospect there thet looks good to me." He lied glibly, for the good of his cause.

"Hear anything erbout the killin' of Menzies?"

"I see a poster to the depot. But I ain't been this way for three-four years. Been further north. Agent told me some erbout it. 'Lowed I might run across this Mc Somethin' or other. Said Menzies was like to git well after all."

"Is thet so? News to us. We've been huntin' him fer nigh a week. Wouldn't wonder if *he* was dead. Didn't hev' any outfit. The reward stands. They'll want him on attempted homicide. If you *do* run across him it might pay you better'n a prospect hole. But you want to look out fer him."

"I ain't huntin' trouble," said Tom slowly. "But five thousand sure sounds good to me."

The posse grinned at his evident sincerity. They were unshaven, burned, weary, their horses almost played out. The desert was no place for a horse.

"Wish you luck," said the deputy as they left him. Tom squinted after them. He was tired, too, and he wouldn't have been, four years ago.

The savor of sand and sage were no longer pleasant to him as they had been in retrospect on the bungalow porch. There was no vegetation now and the heat was terrific, sapping strength and moisture from his failing body. But he knew his own powers. He could make it.

Somewhere round a hundred and twenty-five degrees as he shuffled on, up dunes and down them, over alkaline flats, with here and there an outcrop of rock, the gleam of bleached bones. Later on it would be cooler, freezing cold by midnight.

The bungalow life had softened him. It was not a bad place for an old man, a pleasant shelf to rest on. In the wilderness a man might get sick and die alone; a broken limb, a sprained ankle, might trap him like a coyote. He had made friends, the mailman, the storekeeper, a score of them who liked to hear him talk of his experiences, who would come to him if he was ill, mourn him when he went. Martha, too. A nagger, but with her duty clear. They lived better apart, but he thought he would like to keep on living at the bungalow.

He had little appetite for the meal he cooked after he had looked out for the burros. At midnight he was awake, sleep denied him—thinking of old times and old trails, the desert opalescent under moon and stars, rimmed with mountains of lapis lazuli. It was bitter cold. He replenished his fire and made coffee while the stars were still bright though the moon had gone down in the west, back of the peaks. Jack and Jenny came up for their pancakes, their scraps of bacon.

That night Tom camped at the foot of the Solo Peak. Up in the saddle between Solo and Diablo, Sandy was beleaguered in a burned wrinkle of the range. There was a hard climb ahead but again he could not sleep. He was not going to fail, but he was worn to the quick of body and spirit. His will drove him now, his inflexible purpose.

The sun rolled up and painted the desert and the western range with fantastic splendor. Peaks glowed rose and then the cliffs below them, fissured, ramparted, buttressed, showed as if there had been smeared upon them the scrapings of a giant's palette. Yellow and pink, orange and vermilion, green and amber. Bizarre, terrific. The slopes above were still in shadow. He stumbled over weathered rock, over obsidian dykes, finding by instinctive orientation the way that he and Sandy had once trekked. Up, close to the place now, the desert floor far below. No sign upon it save a wraith of smoke over towards the borax deposits where the train spurred in to the main line.

Buzzards overhead, wheeling, spiraling down. Were they just prospecting or was there something—someone—dead up there?

THERE it was, beyond the outcrop where they had sampled the rock. Marks of their cleavage still plain. He left the patient burros and went ahead, crawling up the broken dyke.

The silence was broken by the sharp, echoing bark of a pistol, the report flung back by the slant of Diablo. His sombrero felt as if a whip had been lashed across it. He ducked.

"Get up thar, an' hist yore hands!"

A figure had leaped to the top of the outcrop, gun in hand. The faint reek of powder gas came to Tom as he looked up into the face of Sandy McNaughton, burned almost black from exposure, his eyes bloodshot, beard bristling, hollow-cheeked, orbs sunk in deep hollows. Desperate and dangerous.

"Don't go off half cocked, Sandy. Don't be a blamed fool all yore life."

Sandy's eyes glared as if they did not recognize him. Then they changed.

They were like balls of steel.

"You, you skunk! Keep pawin' fer the sky. Come to collect on me, hev' ye? Guessed whar I was. I've a notion to plug ye—not to kill ye—an' leave ye to them birds thet's bin waitin' fer me."

Tom did not waver. Sandy was not far from madness. His clothes hung as if on a rack. Tom spoke soothingly.

"You're runnin' off at the mouth, as usual. 'Fore you pull trigger, s'pose you let me tell you why I did come, you cantankerous cuss!"

The epithets seemed to mollify Sandy. A man who meant him harm would hardly try to deliberately aggravate him. But he had been living in momentary fear of being discovered. Once an aeroplane had hovered over him, but he had seen the distant speck and crawled between rocks. It had not returned—but it might. Every tortured nerve was on edge. He was starving.

"Make it short," he said huskily. "I'm goin' to."

"I came fer two reasons, Sandy, knowin' where you was like to be. First was because you took a crack at Menzies. You ain't killed him, but—"

"I know thet. I fired high a-purpose though when I drawed, I was plumb mad. He threatened me. Had a gun in his desk an' reached fer it first. Called me a thief to take his grubstakes. I told him what he was. Had thousands out of me—you, too. It was comin' to him. Go on."

"They didn't mention his gun in the paper, Sandy. They wouldn't. I read about it up to Junction City where I'm livin' in a bungalow. I bought me an annuity. I'm snug. An' I come down here fer the reason I've jest mentioned, an' one other.

"You were right about thet seventy-six dollars, Sandy. I never paid it to you. Come to me all of a sudden. There's fifty-one dollars' worth of chuck on Jenny an' I figgered she should be worth twenty-five more. Figgered thet way it might be more useful to you, under the circumstances. There's five thousand reward out fer you, Sandy, dead or alive. They figger you've no outfit an' got to come out sooner or later. But you know the trails. If you had grub you could sneak down the Nevady side. Travelin' nights. Work south across the border if you like though, if he gits well, like they say he will, I figger they wouldn't extradite you.

"We could risk a fire up here with dry wood, I reckon. I waited breakfast thinkin' we might eat it together. An' I've got a flask of good licker we could take an appetiser out of an' you could tote along."

McNaughton's face worked. It was as if he was putting on a series of rapidly changed masks. His eyes blinked.

" 'Bout time you paid me thet money," he said. "You with yore bungerlow to Junction City an' yore annuity! I'll take the grub an' the burro an' give you a receipt for them, dern yore ornery hide!"

"You kin bet you'll give me a receipt," retorted Tom. "You've yapped about thet money long enough. Jest the same, we might eat first."

Sandy walked away from him, sheathing his gun. Tom brought up the burros, unpacked Jack. He had firewood and there was soon a pleasant smell as the coffee began to simmer, the bacon curled, while he mixed batter in a tin pot and tossed pancakes on a skillet. The fire gave off little smoke. It could not be seen half a mile away, distinguished from haze.

They ate in silence. Then he handed over the flask.

"Taste good in the coffee," he said.

"If I was under any obligashun to

ye," said Sandy at last, the wolf-look gone from his face, "I wouldn't tech the stuff, but you owe it to me. You've owed it fer five years."

"It come to me all of a sudden, Sandy, or I wouldn't hev' come at all."

They glared at each other.

"I ain't beholden to ye none, mind ye, you cross between a Gila lizard an' a sidewinder! Don't hold thet in yore mind."

"All I'm lookin' fer is thet clean slate you put in yore letter. Shylock was the Angel Gabriel alongside of you. You're so dern sartin you're allus right, God A'mighty's overcoat wouldn't make a vest for you."

TOM filled his pipe, shoved another one—new—across, with his pouch. Not looking at it, Sandy's hand strayed towards it.

They finished their pipes and Sandy fished out the stub of a pencil and a location blank, proceeding to write on the back of it with some pains.

"Got yore glasses with ye? Don't want you to say you didn't read this."

"I'll trust you this once. Look at it later. I reckon you should be movin', Sandy. You kin keep along the range in thet gorge, west side of Diablo, an' make thet old camp of ours 'long sunset. Hide all the way. Drop down after dark."

"You don't hev' to advise *me* none. Here's yore receipt. You got a gunny sack?"

"You kin take one of the grain sacks. Mine's nigh empty. We kin feed the burros now an' I kin fix it to tote what's left in my blankets."

Tom spread the grain for the burros after they had been watered from his barrel. Sandy went off with the empty sack. He came back with it bulging and heavy, repacked Jenny.

"Reckon I'll start," he said. A slow grin came on his face.

"When this blows over," he said, "I might visit you at yore swell bungerlow, Tom."

Tom grunted. He watched Sandy start off. Then he called after him.

"You git a sore on Jenny's back an' I'll skin the livin' hide off'n you." She was Sandy's burro now, on false accounting. But that did not matter. The amenities had to be observed.

Sandy did not answer—in words. But he turned and shook his fist at the other. Then a turn in the trail hid him.

Tom fumbled for his glasses. It was a lengthy receipt. He thought of what Martha would say if Sandy ever visited him. More pregnant yet, of what she would say about the annuity check. He had not money enough left to ship Jack. He would have to tramp it back to Valley Junction. But most of it would be pleasant going. A reprieve.

At last he put on his glasses, filled his pipe and sat down to read the receipt before he started.

You'll find float fifty foot from here, back of the yeller rock. It's rotten an' lousy with gold. I've took all I want an' all the burrer can tote. Rest is youres, fer yore trouble. Since you've cleaned slate I reckon we're pardners agen, anyhow, dern yore miserrubbel carkiss.

Sandy.

There was almost fifty pounds of the stuff, a streak that had been weathered and ground down by ancient ice and later erosion. It was crumbling, and larded with yellow. A third of it was gold. He could pan it out and reduce it to twenty pounds at least without loss. Jack could pack it. Fifteen, maybe eighteen pounds of virgin metal. Between four and five thousand dollars' worth!

Tuolumne Tom took off his hat and wiped his sweating forehead.

"The ornery old fox!" he said aloud. "The derned old chuckawaller!"

Twenty-Four Hours to Leave Town

By KEN JASON

Author of "Fugitive's Hot Lead Brand," etc.

A hangnoose was Andy Boone's only trail-side, and a boothill grave his only destiny!

A MAN named Andrew Jackson Boone, whose forebears reach back to the sturdiest pioneer stock of Tennessee and Kentucky, is not apt to be easily frightened—particularly when the man is young, tall and strong, with firm chin and level gray-blue eyes.

Wherefore Andy Boone leaned back in his chair and looked across the table with the glimmer of a smile on his youthful, bronzed features. No smiling was done by the two men who came within his range of vision.

"Will you kindly repeat that last remark?" he said gently.

"I reckon you heard us, hombre!" snapped the elder of the pair. "We're givin' you twenty-four hours to get out o' Black Basin!"

"Sounds as if you might mean it," said Andy Boone, still gently.

"You bet your life we mean it, stranger!" retorted the spokesman.

Andy Boone did not know the men. Earlier this same afternoon he had arrived in Black Basin. The second place he had visited was the "High Spot," a combined saloon and dance hall. When he dropped in for a drink the place was almost empty. An idle dance hall girl seated herself at his table. He had little desire for her powdered and perfumed company, but abided by customary routine. He ordered a second glass of liquor.

The girl did not remain long. Scarcely was the refreshment served when two men walked grimly into the High Spot. Vacant tables were not lacking; nevertheless, after a swift survey of the place, they headed straight for Andy Boone. The dance hall woman jumped up hastily. Without a word the short-skirted creature departed, leaving her drink untouched.

Andy Boone knew something was in the wind. Yet he kept his countenance as impassive as though he had drawn a fourth king to three previously held

members of the royal family.

Uninvited, the newcomers dragged up chairs. Andy Boone studied them. One of the pair was a tall, big-framed individual in his forties. He was good looking in a florid fashion, with hard, slaty eyes. The other man, stockily built and shorter, was sallow and ugly of visage. Possibly he was ten years the younger.

Without preamble the older, taller man fastened his hard eyes on Andy Boone and demanded of him his name and business in Black Basin.

The peremptory tone was not to Andy Boone's liking.

"My name's good's any," was his cool answer. "And my business is my own affair."

"You better tell us what we want to know," the man demanded harshly. "Where did you come from?"

"That," Andy Boone explained patiently, "is likewise and also my own affair. May I rise to inquire if you generally welcome visitors to your fair city in this cordial manner? Is it a custom o' the country or somethin'?"

"Black Basin," said the spokesman sternly, "ain't anxious to acquire undesirables. We don't cotton to suspicious strangers around here. You'll either answer our questions or move on. Make your choice!"

"Your questions have been answered to the extent I opine they deserve," said Andy Boone, his lips tightening.

"Very well; you've made your choice. We give you twenty-four hours to get out o' town!"

It was at this juncture Andrew Jackson Boone had leaned back in his chair.

"Plum' fast work," he murmured at length. "I ain't hardly set foot in town before I'm ordered to travel." His eyes searched the pair. "By just what authority do you act? If either o' you is wearin' a star it's sure well hid!"

"Never mind that! You'll find we speak with authority enough!" sharply. "You ain't the first pilgrim we've sent on his way!"

"Uh huh," said Andy Boone. "But s'posin' I was to get plum' mule headed and stick around, nohow?"

"Don't try it if you value your health!" came the warning. "And there ain't no need to wait twenty-four hours. Check out any time!"

WITH this, the speaker and his taciturn companion arose to their feet. Andy Boone had long since noted that the men were armed, that the hand of the sallow-visaged one never was far from his gun.

The young man sat thoughtfully until the pair left the whisky-scented precincts of the High Spot. He became aware that the aproned bartender was regarding him curiously.

Andy Boone lifted his glass and drained it. Going to the bar, he tossed over a silver dollar.

"Pardner," he addressed the bartender, "do I look to you like a undesirable alien? Have I that immoral, low-down, hangdog appearance indicatin' I ain't hardly fit to mingle with the upright citizens o' Black Basin?"

"I've saw worse lookin' galoots," admitted the aproned one. "I reckon, though, if them gents figure you're undesirable it comes close to settlin' the matter."

"They seem to opine it does," said Andy Boone. "Howsomever, I ain't used to bein' given travel orders thisaway. Just who are them hombres, and what high official posts do they hold in Black Basin, if any?"

"Them's Henry Dorrimer and Fritz Spigel. Dorrimer did the talkin'. They run the big general store here, as well as Black Basin's morals. Usually when they serve notice on a galoot, it's high time for said galoot to vamoose!"

Andy Boone's gray-blue eyes glinted

queerly.

"Dorrimer and Spigel, huh?" he said. "They run the store that used to belong to Asa Cline, I reckon."

"That's right. You knowed Cline?"

"Years ago," Andy Boone responded. "I'm told he was killed—murdered—several months back."

"Yeh, ole Ase was done for in a hold-up o' his store. It was just before closin' time on Saturday night. Cline and Jude Boalt, his clerk, was alone in the place when four masked outlaws marched in, accordin' to Jude's story. Both Cline and Boalt was knocked over the head. Poor old Ase was slugged so hard he never woke up. He sure played in tough luck. It would've been his last day in the store. He'd sold out to Dorrimer and Spigel, finishin' up the deal that very afternoon. In his safe was the money they paid for the business in addition to his own takin's. Bitter Root Bill and his gang made a nice haul."

"Bitter Root Bill?" said Andy Boone. "So they know who the bandits was?"

"Well, everybody figured it was Bitter Root Bill's work. Seein' the outlaws made a slick get-away, it prob'ly was Bill's crew. He's a slippery customer. Raised hell in this part o' Montana for a long spell. But nothin' has been heard o' Bitter Root since Cline got killed."

"And you say Dorrimer and Spigel bought the store on the day o' the robbery?"

"Yeh. They blew into Black Basin from some place in Utah a few days before. Got to dickerin' with Cline and offered him a good price for his place. The deal was closed that Saturday and the money paid over in Lawyer Wheeler's office. They was the owners, no matter what happened to the money afterward."

"Naturally," agreed Andy Boone. "The hold-up was Cline's hard luck—or his heirs'. But how does it happen Dorrimer and Spigel became the town morals squad?"

"Well, young feller, Black Basin used to be plum' full o' rough customers. Eb Dwight, our marshal, is aged and feeble and not much account. And Sheriff Gloster, over in Sandow, don't like us. We voted solid against him last election. So the bad element was havin' things purty much their own way.

"THE killin' o' Cline aroused folks. Ole Ase was pop'lar and people began to demand more law. Dorrimer and Spigel jumped in and offered five hundred bucks reward for the capture o' Bitter Root Bill or whoever murdered Cline. On top o' that they organized what's called the Citizens' Law and Order League. As heads o' the league they've drove a lot o' bad men and outlaws from Black Basin. The place's terrible tame to what it was. I reckon Dorrimer and Spigel have done a lot, though they ain't never run down Bitter Root Bill."

"Do most o' the leadin' citizens belong to the organization you mention?" asked Andy Boone.

"No. Some folks don't like Dorrimer and Spigel. They run the league kinda high handed at times. Anybody they have it in for has to get out. Doc Whitacre, my boss, don't belong. Neither does Lawyer Wheeler. But hombres like Pete Messerly o' the Top Sirloin caffay is real active in it."

"Uh huh," said Andy Boone. "Now I see."

"See what?" demanded the saloon man.

"Bein' as I was hungry, the Top Sirloin was the first place I struck in Black Basin." The young man grinned. "I opine this here Pete Messerly reported me to headquarters. Mebbe he got a idee I might be Bitter Root Bill."

"Which you might, though I doubt it," said the bartender. "Nobody in Black Basin knows what Bitter Root

looks like. At any rate, whoever or whatever you are, young feller, I reckon this ain't goin' to be a healthy spot for you."

"Mebbe not," said Andy Boone, calmly. "Howsomever, I've often took chances with my health. And now, pardner, you can do me a favor. Where would I be liable to find Jude Boalt, who was Cline's clerk?"

"Boalt?" The bartender stared at the young man, but the latter's expression revealed naught. "Why, Jude's been feelin' kinda poorly since the robbery. He ain't worked much since. He baches in a shack about half a mile outa Black Basin. It's all alone in a patch o' woods. Jude's a sour, hermit-like hombre, anyhow. I'll tell you how to get there."

Andy Boone listened carefully to the directions, and thanked the saloon man. He walked out of the High Spot leaving a highly curious individual behind the bar. He was wonderng why this level-eyed young fellow was in the bad books of Henry Dorrimer and partner.

Once in the sunshine, Andy Boone's visage grew somber.

"Funny!" he muttered. "I ask some questions in the Top Sirloin café and look what happens! This Messerly man must've passed it on in a hurry. And he got action. But why should I be ordered outa Black Basin?"

"If I was suspicioned o' bein' mixed up in the hold-up and murder," he continued to muse, "it seems I oughta be locked up and quizzed. Instead, I'm told to leave town because I've showed intrust in Asa Cline. Which is damn queer. I'm sure anxious to have a palaver with Jude Boalt!"

Mounting the horse he had left hitched in front of the High Spot, Andy Boone rode briskly northward. At the edge of town he forked his beast into a woodland trail. A short journey brought into view a rude board shack. This must be the bachelor home of Boalt.

Frequently during the ride Andy Boone had glanced behind. As far as he could ascertain, he wasn't being shadowed.

The young man halted his horse at the shack. He swung from the saddle. His knuckles rapped against the closed door.

"Who's there?" issued a querulous voice.

"This is Boone, Boalt—Andrew Jackson Boone, of Aladdin, Arizona."

Inside, a bolt was drawn. The door creaked open. Andy Boone stepped across the threshold. The door went quickly shut. The bolt shot back in place.

IN a patch of underbrush a few yards distant from the shack there was a slight movement. Presently a sallow visage emerged into view. Glittering eyes focussed on Boalt's cabin.

Unaware of this espionage, Andy Boone was gazing about the shack's interior. A single window lighted the one room, which served as living and sleeping quarters. The place was rather untidy.

Judas Boalt proved to be a thin, stooped man of fifty. His features—narrow and avaricious in type, were pale and worn. He seemed ill or worried—or both.

"Set down, Boone," he invited. "I'm damn glad you got here at last!"

"A feelin' not shared by some folks in Black Basin," Andy Boone said drily. "Already the Citizens' Law and Order League has ordered me hence. I been visited personal by one Henry Dorrimer and Fritz Spigel, who—"

"They know who you are?" Boalt broke in nervously. "Good God!"

"Not unless they're mind readers. But they do know I'm intrusted in Asa Cline's death, which seems to be

enough. I confess it kinda puzzles me."

"It won't when I get through," grimly assured Judas Boalt. He seated himself across from the younger man. At the dirty, uncovered table.

"I'm plum' anxious to hear what you got to say, Boalt. Though I hadn't seen him since I was knee-high to a toad, Ase Cline was my uncle and my mother's only brother. You wrote her two letters. The first was about the hold-up and robbery and Uncle Asa's death. Then, a coupla weeks back, my mother got the other letter. What you hinted at in it has brought me from Arizona to Montana. I want the facts!"

"What I'm about to tell you, Andrew Boone, is gospel!" Boalt spoke hoarsely. "You and your mother are Asa Cline's heirs, and you been foully wronged. I helped wrong you, and I'm goin' to make a clean breast o' everythin'."

For nearly ten minutes Andy Boone listened to the revelations Judas Boalt croaked forth. At the end of that time he rose to his feet. His eyes were hard with anger.

"The skunks!" he gritted. "Boalt, there should be a signed statement o' all this, legally sworn to. Ain't there a lawyer in Black Basin?"

"A good, honest one, Boone—Ben Wheeler. I've already done some talkin' with Ben. I didn't know how soon you'd get here and just to be on the safe side I placed a—my gosh! At the window! I seen somebody spyin'!"

Andy Boone's hand flashed gunward. He sprang for the door. He unbolted it, flung it open.

As he did so, from near at hand, came the roar of a pistol. Andy Boone received a numbing blow on the skull. His knees bent. He pitched to the threshold of the shack. Darkness enshrouded him.

Some time later consciousness returned to Andy Boone. His first sensation was surprised wonder that he still lived. Various other sensations followed rapidly.

Voices buzzed in his ears. Presently, with a decided shock, he grasped what one was saying.

"No doubt they quarreled and went for their guns. This hombre's luck was better'n Boalt's. He plugged him for keeps, while Jude's lead just creased his topknot. A inch lower, and Boalt would've saved the county consid'able expense!"

Jude Boalt dead! And the killing ascribed to him! Dizzily Andy Boone strove to grapple with this hideous nightmare.

Rough hands jerked the young man to his feet. A trickle of blood coursed down his forehead.

"Take the gun outa his clutch and give it to the marshal, Fritz," continued the voice of the accuser, and now Andy Boone identified Henry Dorrimer. "That's goin' to be evidence, I reckon."

The befuddled victim felt something wrenched from his hand. Here was another bewildering thing. He had no recollection of getting his weapon out before being shot down.

"Cal'late I better get the irons on him," wheezed the tones of a stranger.

"See here!" Andy Boone said desperately. "I—"

"Shut up!" said the stranger gruffly. "There now!"

COLD steel linked Andy Boone's wrists. His head throbbed. He felt weak and sick. Handcuffed and helpless, he endeavored to adjust his mind to this astounding situation.

Gradually the young man's perceptions cleared. He saw that he was still inside Boalt's shack. Three forbidding figures surrounded him. In addition to Henry Dorrimer and Fritz Spigel there was a wrinkled, gray-haired person with a star. He must be in custody of Eb

Dwight, Black Basin's aged marshal.

Andy Boone's eyes roved further. They centered upon a huddled form across the room. He stiffened.

"If Jude Boalt's dead, I didn't kill him!" he began. "This is a put-up job by—"

Marshal Dwight interrupted curtly.

"Jude's dead, fast enough. And if you didn't kill him, how does it happen this gun o'yours has one empty shell? No, I cal'late Henry's correct. The two o' you pulled on each other and your aim was better."

"Just like I told you, Eb," Fritz Spigel said quickly. "Henry and me was comin' to see Jude and spring what we had on him. All of a sudden we hear two shots. We was about a hundred yards away. When we get here Boalt's dead with a bullet in his heart. This other hombre seemed done for, too. Henry stayed with the bodies while I took the stranger's horse to fetch you."

"I think, marshal," Dorrimer said, "we've rounded up one o' Bitter Root Bill's headmen. Perhaps it's Bill in person. The shootin' prob'ly grew outa somethin' in connection with the Cline hold-up. We've evidence Jude Boalt aided the bandits. Fritz and me had suspicions from the first and we finally got the goods. As heads o' the Citizens' Law and Order League we was on the way to make Boalt cough up. I reckon he'd double-crossed Bitter Root Bill, like he did his employer."

Dorrimer was lying with the cleverness of the devil. Spigel and he had plunged Andy Boone into a terrible fix. Judas Boalt was beyond talking now. The only ray of hope was the fact he had placed something in the hands of the lawyer, Ben Wheeler. He must get in touch with the latter.

"Well, jasper," it was the marshal speaking, "are you goin' to tell us who you are and why you shot Boalt?"

Andy Boone failed to answer immediately. His imagination was piecing together what had happened since he had been fired upon and wounded.

Dorrimer and Spigel had shadowed him when he left the High Spot. They were aware, of course, that whatever Boalt told Boone meant disaster for them. And they seemed to know the former clerk was expecting a visitor. Intimation had proved futile with Boone. So they had been forced to extreme measures.

One of the partners had shot him, unquestionably with intent to kill. The web now enmeshing him appeared to be an afterthought resulting from the discovery that he still lived.

Boone's own gun had been used to murder Boalt. After the cold-blooded crime it could have been no hard task to put the weapon in Boone's hand. Nor to place the pistol which actually had wounded him in Boalt's grasp. Dorrimer and Spigel had plotted with diabolical cunning.

But why, Andy Boone wondered, had not the conspirators simply disposed of him instead of setting the stage for the marshal's benefit?

A weak link in their fiendish chain, however, was an apparent lack of knowledge of what Ben Wheeler had in his posession. And Andy Boone was positive neither Dorrimer nor Spigel guessed he was Asa Cline's nephew. Revelation of his identity should help.

"Well, jasper?" Dwight repeated.

"I ain't sayin' nothin' until I see a lawyer," Andy Boone said grimly. "I never killed Boalt and nobody knows it better than these hombres. But I opine my side o' the story'll keep until later. Then I'll talk—and surprise Black Basin!"

He watched Dorrimer and Spigel closely. He thought they were faintly uneasy, Spigel more so than his companion. Undoubtedly Dorrimer was the brains of the two.

"Come on then," grunted the marshal. "I cal'late I'll be takin' you to the lockup. Look after his horse, will you, Fritz?"

HALF an hour later Andy Boone was imprisoned behind the bars of Black Basin's calaboose. A bandage adorned his aching skull. The manacles were off of his wrist.

"I opine a man would have his work cut out to bust loose from this lodgin' house," muttered the young man. "I hope the marshal locates that lawyer hombre."

A wrinkled visage appeared at the cell door grating.

"Couldn't get Ben Wheeler, jasper," wheezed Marshal Dwight. "He's got a case over in Sandow today, and won't be back until late tonight."

"Over in Sandow?" said Andy Boone, crestfallen.

"You'll be took to Sandow right soon yourself," observed the officer. "Anyhow you can't palaver with Wheeler before mornin'."

Andy Boone hid his disappointment.

"It'll keep, but I'm apt to spoil if I don't eat. How about some supper, marshal? Do you feed prisoners?"

"Yep—when I have any. I gotta send out for the grub, though, and I ain't allowed much money for runnin' expenses. O' course, if you want to spend a bit extry out o' your own pocket—"

Andy Boone swallowed the hint. A small roll of bills had been removed during the search of his person.

"Grab a five-spot out o' my stake and send for the best meal in town, marshal," he said. "I'm plumb empty!"

"All right, Boone," said the marshal. "I'll have supper fetched over from the Top Sirloin."

It was a hearty meal Eb Dwight procured for his lone lodger. A bowl of hot soup, a thick steak and plenty of French frys, strong coffee and a wedge of apple pie fortified Andy Boone immensely. He felt almost a new man when he topped off the repast with a smoke.

"That's the kinda meal they throw into a hombre before they hang him," he mused. "And if Dorrimer and Spigel got their way I'll be wearin' a hemp collar."

His face grew hard and bitter.

"I'm goin' to be squared with them murderin' crooks before I leave Black Basin!" he vowed.

The evening dragged on. Darkness fell. Andy Boone stretched out on a hard cot. He dropped off to slumber as quickly as if the cot had been soft eiderdown. The experiences of the day had taken toll.

Silvery moonlight was streaming through his barred window when Andy Boone awakened abruptly. Something had disturbed his rest. He wasn't long in discovering what it was.

A key rasped in the cell's doorlock. Presently the door was opened by the marshal. Dwight was half-clad, his hair tousled, his whole appearance that of one rudely aroused.

Back of the officer the pale light revealed two masked men. Each carried a gun in hand. One of them shoved into the cell and addressed Andy Boone.

"Come on, chief! We're takin' you out o' here!"

The harsh voice was unfamiliar. Andy Boone was positive he never had set eyes upon either of the masked intruders. Yet they hailed him as a leader, were about to deliver him from jail. He hesitated, trying to fathom this puzzling circumstance.

"Hurry it up, chief!" growled the second masked man. "I'd think you'd be damn anxious to leave!"

There was something sinister about it all. Andy Boone had the feeling of stepping from the frying pan into the fire. Yet he had no recourse save to accept this apparent freedom.

WHEN the young man was out of the cell, one of the masked pair handcuffed and gagged the infuriated Dwight. The marshal was left in the cell, the heavy door locked.

"I hope you ain't disturbed again, old-timer," mockingly remarked an invader. "Sorry to get you up in the middle o' the night. But Bitter Root Bill's boys ain't in the habit o' lettin' the chief finger behind bars!"

With that parting shot, the disguised deliverers hustled a startled young man out into the moonlight and to the rear of the jail. Here were three horses. Andy Boone's perplexity increased at finding one of the mounts was his black gelding, Hobo.

"Into the saddle!" snapped the leader of the pair. "We got to get to hell out o' here!"

"Just a moment!" said Andy Boone. "I'd like to have this straight. You hombres know I ain't Bitter Root Bill. What kinda game are you playin'?"

A six-shooter jabbed his spine.

"Never mind what we know!" crisply. "You ride!"

At the point of a gun Andy Boone mounted Hobo. Fully as much a prisoner as if in a jail cell, he rode out of Black Basin between the masked strangers.

On the edge of town Andy Boone's guards halted their mounts. Presently, riding out of the shadows, another horseman joined them. The moonlight showed him to be masked.

"So you got him, Steve?" said the new arrival, despite his hidden features Andy Bone knew it was Fritz Spigel. "Did everythin' go through as the chief planned?"

"I reckon." He designated as Steve chuckled. "We snuck in and su'prised ole Dwight in bed. Made him get up and free his prisoner. We left him locked in the cell, thinkin' Bitter Root Bill had escaped him."

"Fine work!" Spigel approved. "I reckon we might's well start movin' toward the hills. We got a job to do."

There was an ominous threat in his harsh voice. Yet Andy Boone spoke coolly.

"Take off the mask, Spigel. I know you, murderer o' Jude Boalt!"

"You won't know nothin' damn sudden!" Fritz Spigel snarled. "You're leavin' Black Basin and you won't be back. Nobody would expect Bitter Root Bill to return, you know."

Andy Boone realized he was in a desperate plight. His plotting enemies had made it appear he was the outlaw leader, and had been rescued by his own men. He would be hunted as the escaped slayer of Jude Boalt and when found—if ever—would be an extremely silent corpse. A beautifully effective way to get rid of him.

"Come on, Bitter Root Bill!" mockingly continued Spigel. "We're goin' to take you to a nice quiet spot where you'll tell us some things we want to know before your mouth's closed for keeps. Just to be on the safe side, I reckon I'll rope them hands o' yours behind your back."

Spigel urged his mount closer. Andy Boone knew once he was bound and the journey resumed, his chances were less than nothing. Now, or never, he must make a break for freedom.

The prospects of getting away with it were far from bright. He was the captive of three armed men, himself weaponless. All he had were his wits, the nerve of a range-bred youth and his own well-trained horse under him. So he called first upon his wits.

"Three to one!" He made his voice bitter. "And that one a wounded, weakened, unarmed hombre. Give me a gun, you cowards, and a chance to shoot it out! Give me a chance—"

Abruptly his voice faded. His eyes closed. He swayed in the saddle a mo-

ment. Then his head seemed to fall forward.

"He's passed out!" said Steve.

"Or bluffin', mebbe," growled Spigel.

Dorrimer's pardner was alongside Hobo's presumably swooning rider. He reached out a rough hand to shake him.

Andy Boone's eyes flew open. His right hand lunged out. His eager fingers closed on the prize he sought. It was one of the two stag-handled guns Fritz Spigel wore.

As his hand snatched the revolver, Andy Boone's knees pressed Hobo's sides. The intelligent steed leaped ahead, carrying the young man out of the startled group.

Fritz Spigel, cursing horribly, reached for his other gun. His ruffian companions, likewise caught by surprise, as soon as they recovered from the shock, reached for their guns.

These precious instants of delay were all Andy Boone needed. When several yards distant, he jerked Hobo around. The stag-handled gun began to blaze before his late captors could draw and take any kind of aim.

ANDY BOONE poured lead into the trio swiftly, without mercy. They had planned to murder him in cold blood, he knew. Therefore he shot to kill.

A marksman of renown on the ranges of Arizona, Andy Boone proved terrifically effective at the short range. Steve was the first to drop under fire. A moment later his unknown partner in the jail delivery pitched to earth with a yell.

Two bullets were required to dispose of Fritz Spigel. With the second, Dorrimer's sallow henchman tumbled from the saddle. A foot remained hooked in a stirrup. Spigel's frightened horse fled snorting into the night. Behind him a limp, ghastly burden bumped the ground.

The brief, sanguinary combat at an end, Andy Boone dismounted. So rapidly had he turned the tables that the two or three shots discharged by his foes had gone wild. He had routed three men, and himself was untouched.

Steve was dead. His masked partner was wounded in the chest, but breathing. As for Fritz Spigel; Andy Boone judged there was little that was mortal left of him.

The gun play had aroused occupants of the nearest dwellings. Leaving the bodies of his masked antagonists to be discovered by whoever chose to investigate, Andy Boone remounted Hobo. He spurred the animal toward the main business section of Black Basin. The hour of reckoning was at hand for the chief of his enemies.

Henry Dorrimer sat eating a late supper at the counter of the Top Sirloin Café. Save for Pete Messerly, the proprietor, and himself, the place was deserted.

Fully ten minutes had elapsed since the sound of shooting had interrupted the big man's repast. Dorrimer was still vaguely uneasy, for a reason he would have found hard to explain.

"If Fritz and the boys messed things up, Pete—" he began when Messerly suddenly straightened.

"Look out, Henry!" gulped the restaurant man.

The warning came too late. Henry Dorrimer whirled on the stool to face an armed invader. A young man with bandaged head and somewhat haggard of feature. In his right hand was a stag handled revolver, cocked and ready.

Andy Boone's eyes burned into the pair.

"Raise 'em and keep 'em raised!" he commanded crisply.

"How the hell did you get here?" gulped Dorrimer. Hurriedly his hands went up. "I thought—I thought you was in jail."

"I opine you thought nothin' o' the sort, you murderin' crook!" said Andy Boone. "Howsomever, I'm goin' back to the jail right pronto and immediate. And I intend to have company. March along, you two friends o' law and order!"

Three men were seated in the office of the marshal of Black Basin. Ancient Eb Dwight was one. Another was Andy Boone, his skull wrapped in fresh gauze. The third person was a gaunt, level-eyed individual answering to the name of Ben Wheeler. It was almost twelve o'clock noon—not quite twenty-four hours since the arrival of Andy Boone in the Montana town.

"We should not have great difficulty in clearin' you of the murder charge, Boone," declared the lawyer. "The confession Jude Boalt made to you yesterday is fully corroborated by a sealed statement he left in my hands a week ago, to be opened in case o' his death. It exposes Dorrimer and Spigel for the rascals they were. One o' them killed Boalt—which one we don't know. But Fritz Spigel is a battered corpse and we've got enough to hang Dorrimer. Boalt accuses him o' killin' your uncle, Asa Cline.

"Boalt's statement proves that Dorrimer was the real Bitter Root Bill. Spigel and Messerly were two o' his aides, but most o' the membership o' the Citizens' Law and Order League were hoodwinked by Dorrimer for his own evil ends."

"THIS feller Steve and the other wounded jasper who busted into the jail last night are outsiders," added the marshal.

"Two o' his original outlaws brought in by Dorrimer to further his scheme," said Andy Boone. "You asked why Boalt helped rob my uncle, marshal. Dorrimer had a hold over him. Years ago Boalt killed a man in Wyomin'. He was forced into the hold-up against his will. Only my uncle, and he could open the safe. Dorrimer killed Uncle Asa and after Boalt opened the vault he was tapped over the head for appearance's sake, I imagine.

"Bitter Root Bill, alias Dorrimer, wanted to establish himself in Black Basin as a seemin'ly solid citizen. So Spigel and he posed as investors from Utah and bought the store from Uncle Asa. They paid a good price with money undoubtedly stolen.

"Not wishin' to lose this ill-gotten coin, Bitter Root Bill used his gang to steal it back again! Maybe they murdered Uncle Asa unintentionally, but murder him they did."

"I never liked either Spigel or Dorrimer," said Wheeler. "What a crust! Organizin' a league for law and order! Even offerin' a reward for their own outlaw selves!"

"A mighty cunnin' rascal is Dorrimer, I opine," Andy Boone shook his head. "He figured he was coverin' up his tracks real elegant and pavin' the way for future devilment. If it hadn't been for Boalt's troubled conscience, the truth might never have leaked out. And when it did, Dorrimer and Spigel tried to prevent it from doin' me any good."

"Your nerve and gun handlin' alone saved you," praised Ben Wheeler. "And now, what Dorrimer and Spigel stole and the rest o' Asa Cline's estate goes to you and your mother."

Marshal Eb Dwight chuckled wheezily.

"Don't forget, Ben," he observed, "the five hundred dollar ree-ward which was offered for ketchin' the murderer o' Cline. This young jasper's earned it. Seein' as how, though, the man what was puttin' up the money's in jail for that very crime, among others, I cal'late he's goin' to have a helluva time collectin'!"

Killer's Gold

By LON TAYLOR
Author of "The Desert Valiant," etc.

Pop Thorne was propped up on the chair, six-gun placed in a lifeless hand to make him look like a suicide

Back-shooting Tony the Blood gun-blasted that grizzled old Arizonian—but Tony didn't know that a man can ride back from the grave to demand a showdown at the border of death's corral!

TONY the Blood felt resentful at Pop Thorne. He had not especially wanted to kill the old codger and would not have killed him if the old prospector had not attempted to draw on him after he had stuck him up in a fair manner. Now, thanks to Pop's stubbornness, he was dead and the Law would be on Tony's heels. Both were losers because Pop had been stubborn.

To relieve his injured feelings he kicked the dead man soundly in the ribs, but drew only a hollow thud and a bruised toe for his effort. He did not relish the sardonic expression in the eyes of Old Critter, Pop's burro, and went over and kicked the animal also soundly in the ribs. This time the thud was not so hollow and he was rewarded with a wheezy grunt which made him feel better, but only for a moment, because the burro, after slowly turning over the insult in his mind, reversed himself suddenly and returned the kick with interest.

Tony the Blood picked himself up from the ground and drew a bead on the beast, but his better judgment stayed his hand. It would not do, he realized, to risk the sound of a second shot. People were curious about stray shots down this way. The present day Arizona, he had come to learn, was a far cry from the Wild West he had seen pictured in the movies. According to the pictures shooting was quite the or-

der of the day, but actually, during the two months that he had spent in the region, he had not heard a shot fired except the single crack of the weapon which had snuffed out the old desert rat.

Cursing and rubbing his hip, where the small heels of the burro had landed, Tony pocketed the gun and set about to figure a way out of his predicament. The burro, satisfied with the matter, shook himself and ambled off.

The killing had taken place not far from the adobe shack which he had shared with old Pop. It was high noon of a blistering July day and already the daily deluge of the early rainy season was being blotted up by the downthrust of the desert sun. Soon the moist earth would cake again under the solar cooking and he could be on his way without leaving too many telltale footprints as a clue to his departure.

In the meanwhile there was work to be done. Pop could not be left there to be viewed by any chance tin canner following the trail which wound through the greasewood, less than a hundred yards from the shack, and besides he must find quickly the reserve of gold that he had reason to believe was salted away on the place.

During the time that he had lived with the old recluse the latter had hinted frequently that he had laid away a sizable poke. Certainly he, himself, had daily helped his benefactor to pound up quartz and pan out enough stray flakes of the yellow metal to keep them supplied with food and an occasional jug of hootch.

"Tony," the old fellow had told him while in a mellow mood, "this here now business of pickin' up stray rock, packin' it in on Old Critter, and mashin' it up for me to slush out color, don't pay much, but, by granny, it's makin' a man outen you! Why, you ain't coughin' half as much as when you first come here and you got color in your face, too. When you git strong enough to stand it, I'm gonna take you up in the foothills and show you some *real* color, and, believe you me, I know whar it is!"

Pop had told him of a streak of pay that he had found. Not a bonanza but too much for one man to handle profitably. "Not that I ain't brought it out, and plenty of it, by myself, from time to time," he had boasted, "but two is better'n one in this here game." Then in a sudden sentimental outburst: "Dawggone it, Tony, it's jest like havin' a son around to have you to help me! I'm gettin' old, Tony, and I ain't never had no son—to speak of."

To the city bred gangster, come to the desert country to heal a troublesome lung, the homely affection of the old prospector was, at first, a novelty, as was the simple state of living into which he had been forced by circumstances, but the monotony had begun to bore him and the idea of robbing his friend and striking out for more lively surroundings had grown upon him until, in desperation, he had put his thoughts into action.

It had been easy enough. Old Pop had come out of the shack with the grocery bag under his arm, squinted at the sky to assure himself that the rain was through for the day, and announced his intention to go to town for the weekly supplies.

"I might be a little late gettin' back," Pop had said. "Got a little dickerin' to do at the bank." Tony had noticed that the old man's hip pocket bulged and he had decided that the time to carry out his plan was at hand.

"Take your time, Pop," he had replied lightly. "I'll be okaydoke. You might leave me one of your gats to spot a jack with. I saw some young ones, yesterday."

"Sure," Pop had answered cheerfully. "Take old Sister here. Her grip'll suit your hand better, and she's

quicker on the trigger than Big Brother," and so saying had passed over one of his guns.

Pop had turned to put the bridle on the burro when he felt the muzzle of the gun shoved against his back. He whirled quickly and the look of hurt surprise on his face had almost made Tony weaken, but he had carried the thing through.

"I hate to do it, Pop," he had gulped, "but I've got to get out of here or I'll go nerts. Just pass over your roll, or whatever it is you got in your pocket, and no harm'll come to you. I'm only gonna tie you up long enough for me to lam out, and someone will find you soon enough. Now, don't make any trouble, Pop!"

"Why, you dirty whelp!" Pop had snorted and reached for Big Brother, and then Tony the Blood had stepped back and let him have it—just once, over the heart.

The frisk had netted nothing beyond two silver dollars, a cheap watch, and part of a plug of tobacco. The bulging pocket had carried only a frayed bandana handkerchief. The killer was therefore resentful.

TONY picked up his frail body and carried it into the shack. He set it up in a chair and pulled down the brim of Pop's shabby old hat to shut out the accusing eyes. Next he took the gun that he had used for the killing and carefully wiped it with his handkerchief to remove any fingerprints that he might have left. If he could make it appear that Pop had bumped himself off in a despondent mood it might save him a toasting on the hot seat, he thought—or maybe they hanged you in Arizona. Neither was a pleasant way out.

Drawing up the pine table so that Pop's right forearm would rest on it, he placed the gun in the lifeless hand and a half-filled jug of liquor beside it. On second thought he poured out a slug of the hootch in a tumbler and held it to the dead man's lips, letting it trickle down over his stubbled chin and the front of his shirt. Then he carefully wiped his own finger marks from the glass, curled Pop's left hand about it, and stood back to survey his handiwork.

The result spelled suicide, but yet his artistic eye was not satisfied. The picture was too casual. With difficulty he moved the stiffened right arm so that it hung straight down at the dead man's side, the muzzle of the gun resting on the floor. That looked better, he decided, yet there was something lacking. Ah, he had it now. There was no powder burns on the shirt such as would show from a close-up shot.

Tony worried the bullet out of a cartridge and pouring the powder on a greasy playing card, held it to the shirt front and touched it off. He next considered the wisdom of writing a suicide note and decided not to do so, as he had no sample of the dead man's writing. He came to the conclusion that he had better let well enough alone.

Only one man, as far as he knew, was aware that Pop had housed him. That was old Tim Brinn, another prospector, who had dropped in upon them bound for the Superstition mountains, over Phoenix way, optimistic that he could locate the lost Dutchman mine, if only he could get a start on the horde that annually spent the summer looking for its sealed entrance.

POP had told Brinn not to mention that he had a partner, and so Tony figured, logically, that Pop had probably not mentioned the fact on his weekly trips to town.

A thorough search for the hidden poke disclosed nothing. Pop's belongings were few and the contents of his ditty box were worthless. Replacing

the meagre collection of clothes and trinkets in the box Tony came face to face with a picture of himself gracing a newspaper clipping. How the old man had got hold of it, down in this corner of the land, Tony could not figure out, but there it was clipped from a Chicago paper, under the heading:

"GANGSTERS SHOOT SQUEALER"

"Chicago gang law asserted itself today, when hoodlums, said to be a remnant of the notorious Babe Bailey gang, went gunning for Tony Geraldi, known to the underworld as Tony the Blood, a former Bailey lieutenant, and wounded or killed him in a running battle.

"Geraldi, who was said to have tipped off the police to certain activities of the Bailey gang, which resulted in the arrest of Babe Bailey and the killing of Snozzle Schultz, one of his bodyguards, was shot in the chest, according to eye witnesses, by waiting gangsters as he emerged from a moving picture house in the Loop. Bleeding badly and either critically wounded or dead, Geraldi was lifted into the car of a companion and driven away, while the assaulting gunmen departed hastily under a fusillade of police fire.

"Inquiries made of the local hospitals failed to show that Tony the Blood received treatment and it is surmised by police officers that, if not dead, he is in hiding or was spirited away to escape further attempt at vengeance on the part of his former associates. Geraldi is wanted by the police for questioning in several gang killings of last year, when the Bailey gang and a rival faction clashed over territory rights."

Tony the Blood burned the clipping in the flame of a match, and felt more kindly toward the dead man. So the poor old lug had known all along about him and had not turned him up. Well, if the old fool had laid off being stubborn and had listened to reason, he would not be sitting there now, cold and stiff, with a gun in his mitt. With the calloused philosophy of his ilk, Tony dismissed the matter from his conscience.

Tony's disappointment about Pop's poke was intense. He was convinced that hidden away somewhere in the shack was the wealth that the old man had boasted that he had taken from his mine, and except that it would have ruined his carefully planned picture of suicide, he would have torn the shack to pieces in an effort to find it. There would be time enough for that, he figured, after the body had been found and he slip back and search at his leisure.

A car stopped over on the trail and two men got out and came toward the building. Fear seized at Tony's heart and he hastened to dig out from his battered suitcase the automatic that he had brought with him on his flight southward.

For the first time, to his recollection, he could not figure out his next step. He could not decide whether to brazen it out or shoot it out. There was no gang mouthpiece to square him with the Law out here, and he was not sure how his marksmanship would stack up with the local brand of gun play. According to the movies these westerners did not miss.

He noted that one of the men carried a gun on his hip and that he cradled a repeating rifle in the crook of his arm. Tony could also see the gleam of a badge on the left bosom of his shirt. The other man appeared to be unarmed.

There was only one door to the shack and this faced the trail. To shut it would arouse suspicion, Tony thought. Since he could not think clearly he would have to let things work themselves out.

Suddenly Tony decided to try his hand at play acting. He dropped into a chair and assumed a grief-stricken attitude, his head bowed between his hands. He would tell them, between

sobs, that he had just come in and found his dear old friend a suicide. If they believed him, well and good; if not, he had the automatic handy in his hip pocket and he would try to beat them on the draw.

The pair stopped in front of the shack and the man with the badge called out:

"Hi, Pop! How about borrowin' a little water for the cyar?"

"Maybe he ain't home, Deputy," said the other man and yawned.

"Sure he's home," returned the deputy. "There's Old Critter browsing out there, ain't he? Pop wouldn't go nowhere without ridin' Old Critter. Guess I'll take a look-see. The door's open."

TONY'S playacting plans melted under the terror that the deputy's words inspired. He slipped noiselessly from the chair and into the dark of a corner closet, flattening himself against the wall and holding his breath. Surely he thought the man would hear the frantic beating of his heart. He carefully drew and cocked his automatic and the mettalic click sounded to his ears like a stroke upon an anvil.

The deputy blinked into the room made doubly dark in contrast with the blazing sunlight without. "Hi, Pop!" he greeted. "You in here, you old catamount? I'm takin' Windy Bates over to the calaboose and we ran out o' water in the radiator. Windy's sort o' eager to git goin' so he can cool off in his favorite cell. How about borrowin' a little water?"

The deputy came in and stumbled over the chair that Tony had just vacated, and then his blinking eyes caught sight of the old man seated at the table. Walking over he jovially slapped him upon the back with sufficient gusto as to cause the hat of the corpse to fall off.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed the deputy. Then to the man outside: "What do you know about that, Windy? Pop's as drunk as a coot. Pop-eyed drunk, if you ask me! Here, you old buckaroo, let go o' that glass and let me deal me out some hospitality."

Tony, through a crack in the door of the closet, saw him pour out a drink, swallow it with a single gulp, and then stoop suddenly to the floor. Now is the time to let him have it, thought the trembling gangster, and was about to start shooting, when he saw that the deputy had only stooped to retrieve the hat, which he replaced at a jaunty angle on the dead man's head.

How the visitor had missed seeing the gun in Pop's hand and the crimson stain on his shirt front, Tony could not guess, unless it was because his eyes were not yet accustomed to the semi-darkness of the room, but apparently the deputy had not seen them and he immediately left and closed the door after him.

TONY heard them draw a pail of water from the lister bag hanging in the shade of the shack, and later heard the clank of the pail as one of them returned it. What he did not hear, however, was the conversation that took place as soon as they were back at the car.

"Listen, Windy," said the deputy. "I'm sorry, old hoss, but I've got to delay your gittin' to the cool o' that jail house. Old Pop has been bumped off. He's sittin' in there deader'n Hector's pup, and whosoever killed him is in there too. I nearly fell over a chair as I went in, and the seat of it was warm where someone had just got up out o' it. When I saw Pop sittin' there with his gun in his right hand I knew something was sure wrong, for Pop's a southpaw and couldn't hit the side of a barn with his right on a bet, even if he did tote two irons."

"How you know the killer's in there?" yawned Windy.

"I knew by his rattle," said the deputy. "I heard him cock his gun as I came in the door."

"And so what?"

"You drive the car down the road about a quarter mile, and wait until you hear me pop twice as a signal, and then come on up and git us."

"Ain't you done made a misstatement, Deputy?" asked Windy as he took the wheel.

"What kinder misstatement?"

"Callin' that there thing a road and this here thing a car."

"You come back here when I pop twice!" growled the deputy.

Thus it was that Tony the Blood, coming out cautiously from the shack ten minutes after he had heard the clatter of the car die out, found himself a prisoner, and in another ten minutes en route to jail.

* * * *

Tony the Blood stood in the thin moonlight in front of the shack where, four days before, he had left the remains of Old Pop propped beside the pine table. He had stoked his courage with liberal pulls from a bottle of whiskey, but he had not yet reached that point of recklessness where he could push open the door and enter.

He tried to remember whether or not he had closed the door after him when he had left. He hoped that he had closed it. It made all the difference in the world, because the door now stood ajar and if he had closed it that meant that someone had found Pop and removed his body. It would be much easier to hunt for the gold without the old man sitting there watching him with accusing eyes.

Hiding out these four days in the greasewood had done subtle things to what small natural courage Tony had possessed. Alternately drenched with rain and baked dry under the relentless sun; longing for a cool breath of air throughout the glaring white day, and cursing the chill that racked his bones when night swooped down, he had found out for himself what the cigarette ads meant when they said that nature in the raw is seldom mild.

Yes, he was certain that he had carefully closed the door, but he could not remember whether or not the deputy, after arresting him, had gone back in to take a further look. He thought not, though, for he seemed to recall a feeling of surprise at the casualness of the deputy and his prisoner, Windy. The joint purpose of the two seemed to be that of getting Windy to jail as soon as possible so that he could cool off. Tony's killing of Pop and his capture had seemed to be secondary incidents in their trip, accepted because they had happened, but of no great interest compared with that of getting Windy quickly to a cooling cell.

A funny country this was, Tony thought. Imagine a Chicago cop letting a captured gangster drive a patrol down to the station while he, the captor, dozed comfortably beside him!

EVEN the lawless were peculiar in these parts. Take this Windy mug, for instance. When the deputy, who had not even attempted to third degree Tony, had dropped off to sleep leaving Windy at the wheel, he, Tony, had made it known that opportunity was with them, but Windy had met his eager nudge with a cold indifference. He had not even been able to draw the commandeered driver into confidential talk.

"What did they nail you for?" Tony had asked and had found it necessary to repeat the question.

"Oh, *me?*" Windy had said finally, after ejecting a gill of tobacco juice. "Dunno, yet. Ain't been tried. Jest killed him last night."

"Killed who?"

"Oh, jest a feller. *But he weren't no*

friend o' mine!" Windy had drawled, after which both had remained silent.

Well, Tony had heard that things were free and easy out here and social customs strange. The idea of a cop napping off with two murderers on his hands! Why, any big city gangster would know what to do in that case, and, being of the breed, he had done it.

His left wrist was yet swollen where the handcuffs had bit in when, with two quick blows, he had brought them down on the heads of Windy and the deputy. Except for that injury he had come out of the affair without hurt, even when the car, out of control, had gone over the side of the trail and crashed down an embankment, with just a moment of hesitation to give him time to jump clear.

He grinned at his own cleverness in the matter. Really he had been more clever in that than in fixing the stage for the finding of old Pop's body. They would never pin that job on him. Windy would get the blame for that. It had been a master stroke to plug the deputy with his own gat and then stick the weapon in the hand of the dead Windy, as he lay sprawled beside the wrecked car.

So far so good. No one had anything on him. Pop, to the casual world, would be checked off as a suicide, and any knowledge that the deputy might have had about the case was dead along with him and Windy. Tony drained the last of his whiskey, or rather Windy's whiskey since he had taken it out of the dead man's pocket after the wreck, and, feeling his courage improved, prepared himself to take up the task before him.

He decided he would need a shovel to dig up the dirt floor. His previous thorough search had convinced him that the gold was not to be found in any other part of the shack, and he remembered, now, that Pop had sharply rebuked him when he had proposed smoothing off the floor so that the furniture would set level.

Pop's prospecting shovel would be in the lean-to where Old Critter, the burro, hung out. Remembering his encounter with the heels of the beast he proceeded with caution to the shed, but the burro was absent. In a measure this was a disappointment to Tony the Blood, because the aching bruise on his hip had caused him to build up a grudge against Old Critter and he fully intended to break the animal's back with the shovel as a parting pay-off.

The shovel and a pick secured he started to round the shack, and suddenly he came face to face with a twelve foot giant limned in sinister form against the pale moonlight. The thing howled dismally and its arms were outstretched to hug him!

Moaning, he fell to his knees and pleaded for his life, momentarily expecting that the horror would swoop upon him, but after many minutes he looked up and there it stood, its waving arms outthrust as before.

"Cripes!" snorted Tony in self-disgust. "Only the old Joshua tree!" Reason told him now that a skulking coyote must have supplied the incidental sound, but the combination sure had scared the hell out of him! His nerves had never before played such a trick upon him. He licked his lips and to his amazement found them wet with his own blood. At first he thought that his teeth had sunk into them in his fright, and then his terror returned when he found that a hemorrhage was upon him. Weak and frightened he sat on the ground until the flow of blood had stopped, and then picking up the tools went timidly into the shack.

He dared not strike a light to guide him in his work, fearing that it would be seen from the trail by someone and investigated, but, by pulling the tattered

shade from the window, enough moonlight seeped through to give him his bearings. However, that part of the room where he had placed the body of his victim was shrouded in darkness.

ABOVE all else, even the hidden gold, Tony craved another drink, but his flask was empty. He knew that the jug, which had rested on the table in front of old Pop, had been half-full, but, for the life of him, he could not summon courage enough to approach it.

But drink, or no drink, he must be getting about the business at hand. Cautiously he tapped about the floor with the flat of the shovel until at one spot it gave back a hollow sound. Greed to get at the old man's savings spurred him on to renewed strength and, digging frantically at the spot, he was soon rewarded by feeling the edge of the shovel imbed itself in wood.

It was but the work of minutes to uncover the lid of the wooden box that Pop had planted as his safe. A padlock barred him momentarily, but disregarding now the danger of too much noise, he worked lustily upon the box with the pick and soon pried off the top. His groping hands, thrust down into the cavity, assured him that here lay no mean prize.

All told there were eight sacks of various sizes, each one heavy with the fruit of the dead man's labor, but Tony the Blood gave no thought to the weary years that Pop had spent in amassing his treasure. His mind played only with the certainty that before him lay good times a-plenty and the fast and dissolute life for which he longed.

Hugging the sacks to him he sat on the floor and rested from his efforts. With the realization that his search had been successful he loosed a prodigious sigh and his heart skipped a beat as the sigh was answered from the direction of the table.

With bated breath he listened, but all was again quiet. Then he laughed nervously, figuring that he had heard but the echo of his sigh, but a more terrifying thing was in store for him. The moon, slowly setting in the west, was gradually reaching its pale beams further into the room in the direction of the table, and Tony's eyes, drawn toward that part of the room, saw two faintly luminous orbs shining upon him.

"Cripes!" he said aloud, seeking courage from the sound of his own voice. "They ain't found the old lug yet! . . . That's all it is. They just ain't found him! . . . He can't see me. It's just the moon shining in his eyes! . . . When you're dead, you're dead, and that's all there is to it! . . . Hell, that's all it is, just the moon shining in the old ——'s eyes!"

He could have sworn that the glistening eyes blinked at him and the hair of his scalp crawled in terror at the thought. Imagination, he tried to tell himself, but the sigh that he had heard was repeated, followed by such hollow grunting and groaning as to convince him that imagination played no part in the matter. The eyes blinked again and seemed to grow larger.

"They ain't there!" he shrieked and dropped his precious sacks to cover his eyes against the sight, but when he looked again the accusing orbs were yet fixed upon him and, to his growing horror, they were nearer. A chair was overturned with a thud upon the dirt floor, and a glass fell and was shattered.

Pop must be getting up from the table and coming to get him, thought Tony the Blood, and gave vent to his fear in shrill shrieks that alarmed the denizens of the locality and set loose a bedlam of night sounds.

Dropping his plunder Tony leaped for the doorway but misjudged the distance and succeeded only in closing the

door with the impact of his body. The latch fell into place and his fumbling fingers could not find it. Thwarted he skirted the walls of the room and tried to force open the window, but the sash had stuck in its casement and the panes were too small to give him passage, even though he beat out the glass with cut and bleeding hands.

Crazed now with terror and physically exhausted, he fell to the floor moaning and begging Pop for mercy; promising to leave the gold untouched; and pledging to give himself up to the law, if only Pop would turn off the glare of his giant eyes and stay put. He broke into a wild babble intended for prayer, but which carried more profanity than supplication, and upon looking again in the direction of the table, saw that the eyes were no longer there.

FOR a moment a wave of relief swept over him and with it returned his greed, so that he crawled over and gathered the sacks again in his arms. Having, as he supposed, worsted the wraith of Pop through the power of prayer, he considered the spoils again his by right of conquest, but his respite was brief. On the far side of the room, quite removed from where stood the table, he heard again the grunting and groaning and the huge eyes, blinking and malevolent, reappeared and drew nearer.

Tony the Blood screamed, but whatever sound issued from his bleeding lips was swallowed up in the hideous outburst of ribald mockery loosed by the thing that was advancing upon him. It was more than the laughter of a demon. It rasped and rumbled like the rusty, metallic laboring of some gigantic mine pump; it grew in volume, rising in shrill crescendo, like the blasts of a locomotive in a mountain cut; it smote the walls of the shack in its onslaught of monstrous sound, mounting dismally until it achieved the ear-splitting climax of all raucous discords—the full-throated bray of a he-burro!

Whether the ears of Tony the Blood heard it to the end or not, is of small matter. He was quite dead when those who had found and removed Pop's body, the day before, returned to check up on the old man's effects.

Sitting there with a grin of abject terror fixed upon his face, Tony the Blood was not a pretty sight, so, the coroner being called, they pried the bags of gold from his stiffened arms and buried him quickly under the joshua tree, and, since he had burned the clipping which would have identified him, he was laid away without the honor of a headboard, and with only the wheezy grunting of Old Critter as his requiem.

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A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

Sonora Till was shooting frantically as Shelley's Colt came up

THERE was a crossroads store and post office somewhere ahead of that veteran Ranger sergeant —Shoutin' Shelley Raines. Very near, if that sudden rising thunder of shots were at the tiny settlement.

Shelley reined in Rojo for a moment. But the firing increased. It sounded like a small battle! He rammed the hooks to Rojo and the long-legged red horse went forward like a bullet.

He had no idea regarding the cause for all this artilleryizing around Bill Crowe's place, but Shelley was on edge —very much on edge—these days. He was apt to suspect Sonora Till of having a hand in everything unusual.

It was not a quarter-mile through the moonlight to the little hamlet that lay at the crossroads. Long before Rojo's racing gait brought him near enough to see men, he saw the stabbing flames of the shots.

It was not hard to determine that two pretty evenly-balanced factions were at war there. His first thought, then, was that a feud had broken out. But he knew of no possible feudists here; no parties enemies to each other. But—whatever it was, it was his job to slide in.

He yelled, when he was within a hundred yards; yelled furiously, again and again. He pulled in Rojo behind an old 'dobe perhaps seventy-five yards from Crowe's store and lifted his voice, repeating a single word:

"Rangers! Rangers! Rangers!"

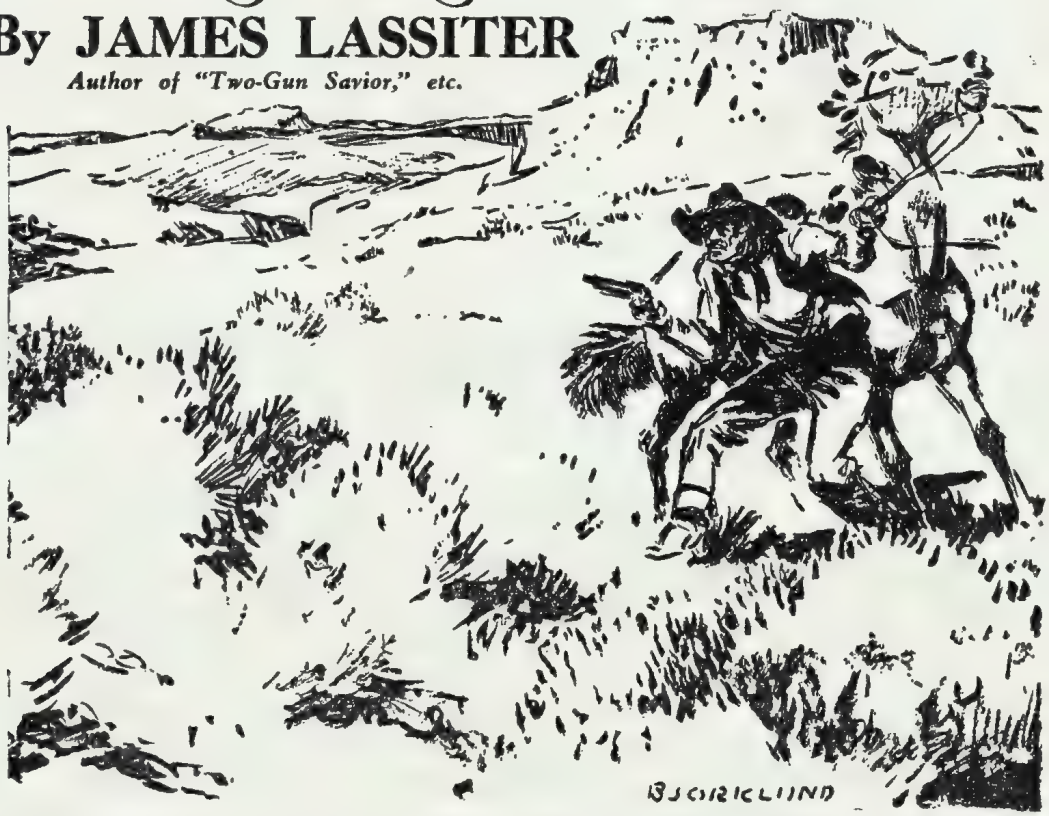
The firing dribbled away; ceased. Men yelled some sort of reply, but he couldn't make out the words. Then he heard a drumming of hoofs. He looked

SMASHING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELETTE OF RANGE-RIGHTS AND ROAD-AGENTS!

Boothill Welcome for Fighting Lawmen

By JAMES LASSITER

Author of "Two-Gun Savior," etc.



A Texas Ranger gets his man, and Shoutin' Shelley Raines lived up to the tradition —even though his quarry was a hard-bitten crew of gunslamming hellions who rode the blood-soaked plains of hell's own range!

out, but could see nothing. He took a chance and rode out into the road again and toward the store.

Men stepped out of its shadow and came toward Shelley. He saw Crowe's white head. Crowe had a rifle over his arm.

"Shelley!" he cried. "I 'low that gang figgered ye was a whole pair o' Rangers —way they hightailed. We got two—ain't made out yit who they be—unless the sher'f has found out mighty recent. Robbers, they was—an' a whole passel-slew o' robbers!

"I'd closed up the store at nine o'clock an' gone home to git supper. Sher'f an' two dep'ties rode in. Later on, we went over to the store to git some tobacco an' —by Jiminy Christmas! They was just comin' out, carryin' two sacks."

The sheriff of Blocker County came up—a stocky, surly man who had no use for Rangers. He looked up sardonically at Shelley. His deputies seemed infected by his surliness. They stood, one at each side of their superior.

"Good-size' bunch," the sheriff grunted. "We downed two. Mebbe hurt some that rode off. Eight-nine in the gang, all together. They hightailed south, hittin' for the *malpais*, when we fed 'em too much lead for their stum-

micks. I'm goin' to take along this bunch an' trail 'em—right now."

"Sonora Till's outfit, yuh reckon?" Shelley said softly, looking down at Sheriff Drew. "Sonora came back across the River with seven-eight mighty hard cases. I got my eyes peeled for 'em. We got word they was headed this way."

"Do' no'. But if it's Sonora's outfit, this'll be the bunch that gethers 'em in an' collects the reward. They got about fifteen hund'd from Crowe's safe, here."

HE whirled and barked his orders. Within five minutes, he, with his deputies and five men and boys of the settlement, were in the saddle. While he waited. Shelley had eaten his supper—bought from Crowe—and rammed more food into his saddle-bags.

He fidgeted in the swellfork saddle. A chance at Sonora Till, that big, black, highly-efficient killer and all around train- and bank- and store-robber.

The posse rode out fast, the brilliant moonlight letting them see the trail of the robbers. Past midnight they lost the hoofprints on harder, more broken ground—the beginning of the *malpais*. They rolled up in their blankets and slept until the gray dawn. But coursing about did not show the trail again.

Shelley pulled in Rojo with mouth grimly set. He considered the country in all directions. Sheriff Drew looked at him:

"No use killin' time. I figger they're makin' for the south. I'm goin' to cut straight across the *malpais* an' hunt trail toward Durbee. Hit the railroad an' do some wirin'."

"No good," Shelley said grimly. "They ain't ridin' south. They rode this far to lose their hawses' feet. I figger they went toward Pow Wow. We better cut that way."

"You can—if you want to. I told you what I'm doin'. Or you can ride with us—if you want to."

"Yeh," Shelley nodded, brown, high-nosed face very grim. "If I figgered Sonora Till went thataway, yuh couldn't keep me from ridin' with yuh. But that country's too thin-settled for his outfit. He's huntin' real pickin's."

"He—has kind o' set on you." Drew grinned maliciously.

"He has al'ays had the breaks. Shot me from behind, once. Left me for dead an' hightailed. Busted out o' jail when I'd slammed him into it. But this time—"

Shelley turned and with a jerk of the hand for the party, rode off toward the eastern line of the county. There was no sense in killing Rojo, now. So he merely rode steadily all day. The occasional punchers or freighters met had seen nothing of such a gang as that he hunted for. He stayed overnight on the Half-Box 9 without doing much talking; rode on after breakfast.

Nearing Pow Wow, he met a cowboy toting a headache home from town, though it was only mid-afternoon. He was a shabby figure in overalls and old hat, but riding a good 2-Bar-Cross black. He said that Pow Wow was quiet—now.

"Bandy Box is takin' his sher'fin' plumb serious. He gethered in my sidekicker, Red Ralls, along with six more fellas that was goin' to shoot up the town. Do' no' who them fellas was. They come into town some time yeste'day when I wasn't the' an' wanted to see the elephunt an' hear the owl."

Shelley, stiffened in the saddle, stared with hard gray eyes at the gossiping puncher. Then without a word of farewell he put the steel to Rojo and swept up the road to Pow Wow as if—the puncher said to himself—"a bee had chose him."

"Could it be?" he asked himself unbelievingly. "That bunch o' curly wolves gethered in by such a .22 caliber

as Bandy Box Sonora—an' the five that'd ride with him?"

He slowed down from the hard gallop at the edge of Pow Wow. He looked keenly along the widening of the road which, flanked by massive one-story adobes, was not only Pow Wow's longest street, but Pow Wow's only long street. The drowsy quiet of late afternoon was like a blanket upon the place.

The sheriff's office in the front of the courthouse was empty. A lazing Mexican, going by, shrugged that he had seen the sheriff and Pink O'Day, his deputy, in there, earlier in the afternoon. Shelley leaned in the doorway. He was minded to stroll across and yarn a bit with Al Jones, president of the bank across the wide street. Then, turning, he saw the ring of keys—to the jail behind the office.

"No harm in havin' a looky!" he said to himself, tensely. "Bandy wouldn't mind, I reckon."

He took down the ring from its nail and, with Colt in his right hand, unlocked the wooden door that opened upon the gloomy cross-hall that was the jail's front corridor. He heard nothing; saw nothing, even after his eyes became refocused to the jail's dimness.

"Hell!" he said nervously as he stared.

For the big cell that occupied most of the jail's floor-space—the "bullpen"—was empty. And there were only three cells, besides this. . . . He wondered if Bandy had let that bunch go. Wondered if they had really been *his* gang. Wondered if—whether or not they were—he might find them somewhere around town.

But he went on in, looking keenly to right and left up and down the hall. Cell Three was empty. Cell Two—There was a fellow asleep on a shakedown, a pallet, on the floor. His head was turned away. Cell One was also occupied. A smallish, bowlegged man lay half-on, half-off, a shakedown like that in Number Two. Shelley stared, then—

"Por amor de dios!" he gasped. "Bandy Box! An'—unless he's the best actor ever I saw—"

THE cell-door was locked. He unlocked it flashingly and streaked inside. Bandy was dead. He had been dead for an hour, at least. He was bareheaded and his famous red shirt had been stripped from him. He was weaponless, too.

The adjoining cell's prisoner was a stranger to Shelley. But he wore a deputy's star. He was also dead. No, there was the faintest sort of heart-beat. Shelley, feeling the heart, saw a piece of wrapping paper pinned to the deputy's shirt. There was a black scrawling message on the paper and he saw his own name. . . .

Long time no see you you mangy screw but you will hear plentie from here out. before we get done Texas will call Sam Bass a tinhorn pennie antie buscadero wich he was. I hope you start trayling us from here because you will get to finde out what the Sun lookes like when you looke at her Through the Gras rootes. I knowed Gil Manriquez seen us crossin and he would tell you lousie bumms and knowed you would come this far. Now come over to the Bank when you have read this piece. from the One who is goin to get you Right this time.

It was signed by Sonora's road-sign, the coiled rattler. More than once, Shelley had found that trademark on a job. But it was a little different, on this note. The rattler's neck had stretched and he was biting a sheriff's star.

"Tolled us up to the bars!" a voice whispered and he jumped not more than five feet. It was the deputy, trying agonizedly to tell his tale. "Had us covered—do' no' where they got them guns—then they—killed—"

He was gone, this time! Shelley turned and ran out of the jail; through the sheriff's office.

In the door he stopped to glare at the quiet, peaceful front of the bank opposite. But he was too old a hand to go straight across that street, into possible gunfire from gentlemen perfectly concealed. It seemed to him that he rode a mile before he could come, moderately covered, to the side-door of the bank—the door of Al Jones' private room.

Shelley yelled for Jones and when no answer came, tried the door. It gave. He burst through and slid to one side, a big, stony-faced, blazing-eyed figure with a Colt in each hand ready to deal out as many .44's as his fated string would let.

Al Jones, tied to his big oak chair, eyed him steadily from over a money bag that was bound around his face. A wizened little man, lashed to one leg of the huge desk and similarly gagged, glared waspishly at Shelley.

When the two had been released, Al Jones jerked a head toward the door of his office—the door leading into the bank.

"Carteret's dead, out there. Stomach cut in two. They been gone thirty minutes an' more by the clock. Seven of 'em, led by a big half-breed looking fella that'd make you and half another your size."

Shelley made that inner door in two long steps and flung it open. The window-curtains were down on the street-front and there were no windows in the side-walls. So the interior of the bank was very dusky. He stepped inside and from a corner came instantly the bellow of pistol-fire. He dropped on the floor and fired twice almost at random, toward the blazes.

He began to wriggle nearer, wondering if that could be Carteret, the cashier. He might not have been dead—Al Jones, in such a moment, could easily be mistaken. But—there couldn't be one of the gang there; not thirty minutes after the robbery. Nobody would be fool enough to stick around. . . .

THEN he saw the dead cashier, whom he knew slightly from other visits to Pow Wow and the bank. Carteret was not one to be mistaken: his womanish smallness of figure, his citified clothing, above all, his waxen-white skin and ash-blond hair. These made necessary no more than a glimpse for complete recognition.

"That's Carteret," Shelley told himself, scowling at the huddled, still figure lying in the path to the vault. "So, either some o' the gang was dropped an' left behind, or somebody has sneaked inside since they left an'—

"Hey!" he yelled abruptly. "Come out o' that, now! An' come punchin' holes in the sky whoever yuh-all are! Yuh're plumb surrounded an'—*Ahhh!*"

For there came, not a surrendering yell, but a defiant burst of pistol-fire that chipped the bank-furniture scandalously and sent splinters rapping on Shelley's hat and face and hands. He moved to one side swiftly and noiselessly and waited, having given two long groans as sad as he could muster.

Around the corner of an old-fashioned, flat-topped desk base came a head and shoulder, very cautiously—a round head, upon which black bristles stood up every which way; a long, thin, leather-yellow face, with sharp-pointed nose and round hazel eyes set close against its bridge; and a huge, thick-lipped, perpetually-sagging m o u t h above tiny, marble-round chin. Barney Choice—none who had ever seen the nitwit's face would ever forget it, or mistake it even in a dim light.

But Shelley knew that, feeble-minded as Barney was, he was dangerous in precisely the degree a side-winder is—the little desert rattler strikes when ap-

proached. So did Barney Choice. So he aimed at Barney's forehead and let the hammer go. But Barney stretched his long, thin neck at that moment, for a view of his supposed victim. The bullet tore through his chest high up, above the heart. He yelled and his gun clattered on the floor.

Shelley hurled himself across the twelve feet or so between them. He caught Barney's clawing hand as it crooked about the .32-20 butt. He twitched the Colt away and was instantly deafened by the roar of Barney's left-hand gun—which, apparently, the wounded outlaw had not been able to use until then.

The bullet fairly fanned his cheek. He writhed sidewise and heaved himself upward, over Barney; landed on his back with the full weight of his hundred-eighty pounds and pinned Barney's left wrist to the floor. Barney was limp, now. That little spasm of action was the last he had been capable of mustering. Shelley turned him over, so that the yellow, imbecilic face was in such light as the dusky room afforded.

"What yuh doin' here?" he snarled at him. "Answer up, or I'll save the hangman a job! Answer me!"

The round eyes opened. The thick lips writhed in a prideful sort of grin. Barney made mumbling noises.

"Y' don't—git nothin' out—o' me!" he gasped defiantly. "Y'—Y' mangy screw!"

Shelley scowled down at him when the limpness of face, the closed eyes, showed unconsciousness. That last sentence told a good deal, if nothing much to help. For "mangy screw" was Sonora's language, from the note left in the jail. Barney was with Sonora; and Shelley thought that it was Sonora's undoubted nerve which had infected this nitwit, to make him so defiant now.

Shelley whirled with Colt in hand at a footstep behind him, but lowered his muzzle when he saw that it was Al Jones. With him was that waspish little cowman.

"He's gone, I figger!" he said to Jones, standing up. "I plugged him in the chest. How-come he was here, I swear I do' know! He wasn't left behind, hurt. He ain't hit nowheres else. We got to git after 'em! Yuh better take a looky an' see what yuh're missin'. But if yuh had much—"

HE jerked his head at the open vault. Certainly, it had been no trouble for the robbers to march in and take out whatever they wanted.

"Reckon they cleaned me," Jones said with the flat, even voice of a man who knows he has been hit the hardest possible blow. "I had thirty-five thousand extra to take care o' some buyers that have been travelin' around the neighborhood. You'd think the scounels knowed it, hittin' today."

"They gethered *me* outside the bank," the dark little cowman rasped, glaring down at Barney Choice. "Ask' me where I was headin'. I says: 'To the bank, to talk to the president'; an' that big, half-breed lookin' one, he laughs. He says that's fine; he'll trail along. An' they rammed three-fo' pistols into my backbone an' pushes me around to Al's sidedoor an' makes me yell to Al to open up, givin' my name—Edders. They—why, they even took my gold watch! Wholesale an' retail both, they are!"

There came furious pounding and yelling from the street-door as Al Jones moved quickly about, trying to check what was gone. Shelby went over and opened the door.

Men with guns out were there, yelling questions about the shots. They came surging in to crowd against the windows and peered through the mesh of the partition at Al Jones and Edders. Shelley stood with back to the employees' door

and told them briefly what had happened.

Al Jones came forward, white and grim of face:

"They got forty-odd thousands, men. Hits nobody but me an' the other stockholders. But they downed Carteret an' they took along Doc' Pedersen—sent a boy that was passin' for the Doc'. Told him to say Carteret had a stomach-ache. For Carteret, he had like to knocked one's head off with a big brass paper weight before they got to him. Reckon they took Doc' along to fix that one up. Anybody see 'em hightail?"

Nobody had. Al Jones found two of the bank's stockholders in the crowd and these three stayed in the bank.

Shelley and the others went out and hunted for sign. Not long until dark, now! Shelley thought grimly. He looked across at the tumbled ruins of the 'dobe houses on the bank of Pow Wow Creek—Old Town, deserted after floods had made the location dangerous. The footprints of the group of men coming out of the bank's back door seemed to head that way. Likely, he thought, that their horses had been sheltered there.

He coursed the ground for a moment, until he found what he had hunted, the tracks of Barney Choice—at least, they were the tracks of one man and such as Barney might well have made—coming back to the bank.

What had been forgotten? he wondered. He stood for a full sixty seconds' period, glowering down at the heelless prints, trying to figure out that puzzling angle to the robbery. Then a yell from some of the men, who had also been wandering, studying the ground, jerked him back to the present. He looked up.

Edders was waving frantically:

"Hey! Sergeant! Looky yere! They rode off thisaway! We better be gittin' our hawses an' follerin' 'em."

From behind a 'dobe shell not fifty yards to northward of the bank's backwall, there led the plain trail of eight or nine hurried horses. The townsmen and punchers and other idlers about the place scattered frantically, to round up the animals they had left in corrals and at saloon and store hitch-racks.

SHELLEY had only to whistle, for Rojo stood like a rock when his reins were dropped—until he heard that whistle. When the red horse came tearing around the bank, he swung up and rode a little forward on the trail.

"Wonder where Barney Choice's hawse went?" he said absently. "Reckon he's behind one o' these walls some'r's. . . . But I got no time to be worryin' about him. Whole town's comin'!"

It was, indeed, a very representative gathering, with the black-eyed little Edders furiously in the van. Shelley had to grin—if tight-lipped—at sight of the waspish little cowman. That must have been a treasured timepiece the gang had taken off him, from the eagerness he showed to be after them!

"Plainer'n Long Primer Print!" Edders howled at him, coming up abreast of Rojo. "*Yeeoow!* Headin' toward the Little Conchita, looks like. Aimin' to git into the brush, likely!"

They rode hell-bent, with cowboys yip-yipping enthusiastically in the body of the ragged column, for a mile or more. The trail led toward the Little Conchita's Right Fork, as Edders had said. The ranches along the Right Fork were big outfits, well separated, and there was spendid cover in the brush along that stream for men not wishing to be seen. A logical sort of place to head for; the best in Pow Wow's neighborhood.

"Somebody comin'!" Edders yelled at Shelley, who was already staring hard at the advancing horseman.

They came nearer. The rider—bare-

headed, he was—sat his horse and watched for a couple of minutes, as if undecided whether to wait for them or to run away. Then he spurred toward them. He was a lanky cowboy in middle twenties, red-haired and freckled, with a hard, but humorous, mouth.

"Gents!" he greeted them. "I'm downright pleased to see yuh! The company I be'n in lately has be'n entire-ly too plumb hair-triggered an' sticky-fingered for me. An' fond o' my comp'ny! Gents, yuh wouldn't believe it how they th'owd their arms around my neck, almost, an' tried to keep me from leavin'!"

Shelley saw that the rawboned sorrel he rode was a 2-Bar-Cross animal. He asked the cowboy his name and nodded when the redhead said, "Ralls." This, then, was the cowboy Bandy Box had gathered in for disturbing the peace.

"Where'd yuh figger, in the jail-bustin' an' bank-robbin'?" he demanded bluntly. "An' where's the rest o' the outfit?"

"I figgered to dam' much like a li'l slick-ear to suit me." Ralls shrugged grimly. "Them fellas was wolves! Bandy put us all into the bullpen to go to co't tomorrow mornin'. But two o' them gunies had guns in their boots. They tolled Bandy an' Pink O'Day up to the bars—to read a paper, one fella says—an' killed 'em both.

"Got the keys an' took me along so's I couldn't give no alarm. Herded me over to the bank, too. But after we high-tailed an' got to goin' like the clatter wheels o' hell along this-yere trail, I saw my chance an' cut away."

He lifted his arm eloquently and showed a rent in his Booger Red jumper. Shelley stared and shook his head.

"Pretty dam' close!" he grunted. "They just kep' on?"

"Headin' for the Right Fork o' the Little Conchita," Ralls nodded. "An' if yuh'll loan me the borrowin' o' somethin' to augur with, I'll be pleased to go along an' help salivate 'em.'

"Somebody else comin'," Shelley frowned. "Ain't that ol' Don Bernardo Baca, Edders? Can't be two saddle-mules like his in the State o' Texas!"

"Can happen," Edders nodded, after a long stare. "He ain't none too shore a good Christian ought to associate with us, looks like. He's coy an' dilly-dally; not to say, plumb stand-offish."

BUT the old Spaniard decided to risk them. He came pacing up on his magnificent tiger-striped mule and bowed courteously to them all. For Shelley he had a quick smile. Shelley had once spent the night with Don Bernardo.

"Something is wrong?" he inquired in Spanish, and clucked amazedly when he was told. "But—But, my friend! Don Shelley! No robbers have come this way! You know where my hacienda lies on the North Fork. Well, I have ridden from there, now. You can see the trail ahead, going straight to the Little Conchita. And no robbers have ridden that way, else I should have seen them as I came. Is it not reasonable? You are somehow on the wrong track, my friend."

"Bosh!" cried Ralls. "Didn't I just a couple hours back bust loose from 'em? Don't the trail of 'em lead straight this way? Yuh was snoozin' in yo' kak, ol' timer!"

"You saw nothing of any bunch of eight or nine, riding hard?" Shelley asked, frowning. He trusted the old man's head.

"Oh, yes! But not robbers. That is, not bank-robbers! I saw the *vaqueros* of the Slash-E tear past where I sat my mule in a thicket. And—yes, this is their trail you follow."

"My boys!" cried Edders. "Why—Hell, Raines! It can't be! They left

town middle o' the afternoon! Julio Acosta, he come to me an' says they're shovin'. . . ."

"It seems to me, señor, that the time of their leaving would mean nothing," Don Bernardo objected courteously. "For whatever time they left today, they must leave a trail. And if you gentlemen have followed that trail by mistake—"

Edders turned in his saddle, shaking his black and bristling head, to look all around the horizon. The others stared, also, as if to find out there on the brush-crowned rises the answer to their problem. Edders suddenly made a rasping sound and jumped from his horse. He picked up something dully shining from the dust and waved it triumphantly.

"Somethin's funny! Yere's my watch them hairpins took off'n me! Somebody out o' that gang has been ridin' this trail—an' I don't care how many Don Bernardo never see!"

Ralls nodded. Shelley winked at him covertly and lifted his hand to quiet a muttering that had begun in the body of the posse. He said that it was best to go back to town and look around for the trail.

"We naturally come off half-cocked. No matter where the trail leads to, we'll do better to cut it from town first an' then foller along it. A slower start'll mebbe give us a quicker finish. Le's go—all that feel like me!"

"We don't feel like yuh, a damn' bit!" a gray old cowman said grimly. "The's somethin' mighty queer about all this. Yuh seem to be takin' stock in what this 2-Bar-Cross boy tells yuh, but not enough stock to keep on goin' to foller the trail o' the gang he says he busted off from.

"Yuh're agreein' with Don Bernardo an' Ralls both, seems like. We augur yuh can't side with both of 'em. An' we're sidin' with Don Bernardo! We figger this boy was lyin'. That he was mixed into the bank-robbin' an' the killin' o' Carteret a sight more'n he admits. An' we aim to make our belief plumb bindin' with a good manila lass-rope—an' the proper kind o' knot!"

The posse—or most of it—yelled fierce enthusiasm over this grim pronouncement. It surged forward and twenty ropes were jerked loose from saddlehorns or rope-straps. But Shelley, instead of retreating, went forward two quick steps and put Rojo in between them and Ralls. His carbine had jumped up and so he faced the fanlike front of them.

"Cut it out!" he counseled. "Yuh know me, some o' yuh. An' yuh ought to know yuh'll never take my prisoner while I can pump the Ol' Gal here-The's enough o' yuh-all to eat me, but the's plenty o' *me* to give yuh a belly-ache an' a dark-brown taste in yo' mouths. I will certainly cut some o' yuh in two before yuh down me. That's right, Ralls! Yuh got a perfect right to protect yo' life! Remember she's a hair-trigger!"

RALLS had twitched a Colt from Shelley's holster and the two of them now faced the posse. Edders, mumbling, lined himself beside them.

"Now, this fella's goin' to jail an' if the's any good reason we can rake up, to put him in the pen' or in a wood box under the dandelions, that'll be done. But none o' yuh'll take him off me an' remember the job was soft."

They hesitated sullenly. There were some there who *did* know this big yellow-haired daredevil. Knew his reputation for gunplay and for single-track bulldoggedness of mind. At last, the old gray spokesman shrugged.

"If yuh put her like that, we'll leave her lay a spell. But we still 'low it's plumb dam' foolishness to waste time takin' him in."

They rode back to town. Dusk fell

before they reached the outskirts.

Shelley was entirely and thoroughly displeased. He wanted to see Sonora Till and the others lined up before him; he had hoped that, before this time, the red Colt-lightning would be flaring, rolling Colt-thunder snarling sullenly. That he and Sonora Till would have had the chance to shoot it out and prove, once and for all, who was better man.

"What's that shootin'?" Edders yelled at him, abruptly, as they came to the edge of town. "It sounds like it's —"

"South end o' town!" Shelley nodded.

They jumped their horses to the gallop and went yelling like so many Indians—or cowboys—into a sandy cross-street and into the almost-deserted Main Stem. No sign of pistol-fire, but the staccato rattle of shots was louder now.

Above it came, suddenly, the deeper roar of a rifle—and a big rifle at that! A Sharp's .50, Shelley guessed, listening mechanically. Then, as if it were controlled by a button and that button had been pushed, the firing ceased.

They poured downstreet to the bank and split, half of the posse going on and around the far corner, the remainder whirling at the near corner. There was still the sharp odor of powder-smoke in the air, here. Shelley sat Rojo down on his tail and looked quickly around him.

A grim, level voice challenged him from the bank. He answered, recognizing Al Jones' high-pitched drawl.

"What's it?" he added. "Another robbery?"

"Same bunch! Do'no' what they figgered they'd collect this trip. But happened I was lookin' out, thinkin' about supper. See 'em comin' up—six in a row, rifles across their arms. I yelled to the others in the bank here an' we snatched up the Bank-Winchester an' let 'em have it through the winders.

"I do'no' as we'd have beat 'em back. But Andy Childers, he jumped up next-door with his buffalo-gun. An' somebody in the gang yelled: *'Chigaroo!* Hawses comin'!' Reckon they heard you-all. They backed off toward Old Town."

"Come on, fellas;" Shelley yelled at his posse. "They're headed for the old 'dobes in Old Town!"

"Ralls hightailed!" Edders said curtly, almost in his ear. "He still had yo' gun, too! Slid out an' I just happened to see him against Andy Childers' backwinder."

"Ne' mind. We'll gether him later, if we want him."

They spread out, fan-wise, to breast the tumbled 'dobes of the deserted town. Almost instantly, it seemed, a line of fire jumped along a low wall no more than forty yards ahead of them.

A man crashed out of the saddle so near to Shelley that he jerked his head sideway to see if it were that little wasp, Edders. But it was a huge freighter of Pow Wow.

"Off yo' hawses! We're too dam' good targets!" Shelley yelled. "Down low an' shoot low. Stitch 'em for buttonholes!"

THEY moved forward afoot, bending low. They came up to the wall and found it deserted, as they had expected. Orange flames stabbed the darkness, nearer fifty than forty yards ahead of them, this time.

Shelley grunted to men about him. The word was passed on to right and left. The ends of the posse's line went forward while the center kept up a hot fire on the outlaws' position. Time went swiftly as the punchers and townsmen pushed the ends of their line forward and inward to make a half-circle, three-quarters of a circle and, finally, a complete circle that was a constricting ring about the force of Sonora Till.

Once in the ruins that were scattered irregularly over the wide, sloping bank

of Pow Wow Creek, it was hard to keep a close-knit and even line. Shelley found himself slipping forward alone. And he stopped to peer around the corner of an old house-wall as the moon lifted its edge above the highest ruin and gave indirect light to the scene.

He saw nothing and started across to the next shell. And a huge figure materialized from behind a ruined wall to the left. They saw each other at about the same instant, Shelley and Sonora Till.

Each had a rifle in his hands, at the ready. Each jerked the muzzle about and fired mechanically. Both missed that first shot.

Shelley heard his firing pin click on empty barrel as he tried to fire his second shot. Sonora's bullet struck a corner of the 'dobe and knocked dust into Shelley's face as he reached for his right-hand Colt.

Shelley cursed Ralls, the red-headed runaway, in that split-second of slapping empty holster. Then he let his .44 drop and jerked out his left-hand gun. Up it came in a blur of movement. The hammer went back—and dropped.

But Sonora was shooting frantically. A bullet struck the 'dobe wall on Shelley's left; another thudded through his seasoned hat's crown; still another burned his left hand as it ricocheted off the wall. Shelley flung the Colt from left hand to right hand in the magical Border Shift for a second pistol shot that would go straight.

But Sonora hurled himself sidewise and behind the wall from which he had come. Three or four men began firing from the same place. Lead fairly rained around Shelley as he jumped back to shelter.

He was joined by others of his side. They made it suicide for anyone to try to lift his head above that wall's top. They could hear firing to the right and the left and well ahead of them. The firing from the outlaws' position slackened somewhat.

Shelley grinned to himself contentedly as he lay at ease and drove bullets at whatever flashes appeared before him. In the brightening moonlight, he saw no way on earth that the much outnumbered gang could get away.

They were surrounded, now. It was just a matter of whittling them down a bit more, then making a rush at them. And then—if he could not find Sonora and resume the duel, it would be hard lines, indeed! It was some small satisfaction to know that it had been Sonora who backed off, when they came to gunplay there in the open.

A half-hour went by; stretched to three-quarters. The posse crept up nearer the weakening fire. Shelley lifted his very good voice in a fierce yell and they all jumped up and raced toward the wall, well spread out, bending low. They got to the wall and vaulted over it.

There, in the moonlight, were three men—two Mexicans and Red Ralls. Ralls was the only one who seemed to have life in him. . . .

SHELLEY glared fiercely about, in search of the others. The rest of the posse and the citizens who had joined the battle surged in and the three sprawling figures were encircled by the ring of them. Shelley stooped and shook Ralls savagely:

"Where's Sonora? Where's the rest o' the bunch?"

Ralls' hard, humorous mouth twitched sardonically. He beckoned to Shelley to bend lower.

"You couldn't—quite—git the'!" He grinned. "They be'n gone—a hour. We stuck—me an' them two—fightin' Mex' —because we—was already hurted. I told Sonora—we'd hold yuh-all! We done her! An'—what're yuh—goin' to do—about it? They had the hawses—in the brush the other side the creek."

Shelley glared at the men who had been on that far side of the battle. They stared back at him, very levelly. They had seen nothing; heard nothing; and that was that. Shelley said bitterly that five men could hardly have got through the line without making some noise.

"Listen, Shelley!" a stubby brindle-headed youth grunted soothingly. "Y' know me, Ginger Toolen. Well, I'm tellin' y' I was out on that side an' they used to say, in the Rangers, I had good ears. Well, I'm tellin' y' we rounded up this spot dam' nigh elbow-to-elbow. An' nobody come toward us, a-tall!"

"It's not their fault, Sergeant," a white-haired man put in. He had just pushed through the group to look down at the three men on the ground. "There's an old passage under the ruin of this old mission. That's why Till picked this spot for a hide-out, today. They slid into the hole—it's over yonder in that pile of 'dobe bricks—and went right under your line.

"I'm Dr. Pedersen. They've held me prisoner all afternoon. But when they went to the bank the second time, they left me in the charge of that Mexican, there. I slammed him in the face with a brick and went over the wall like a Jackrabbit. Ran like a jack', too! Got clean away."

"Well, they're gone! said Al Jones.

He stood with the two stockholders of the bank.

"Toolen," said Shelley to the ex-Ranger, "yuh know this country? *Bueno!* Now they're hightailed, where'd they be likeliest to go, headin' east like they done?"

"Straight for the Malpedros an' that big scope o' brushy country that runs clean up to the foothills o' the Windy Hills—an' be damned to who follers 'em!" Ginger Toolen said promptly. "Y' see, Shelley, oncet they git into them Windies, y' might's well hunt for a prairie-dog that's hit a hole in the middle of a big town. They can cut an' twist an' walk the rocks till we never *would* know whichaway-was-away!"

"Yeah, they're plumb gone—with a hour start," Edders nodded gloomily. "Ye're right, I reckon, Al!"

Al Jones and the stockholders beside him shrugged even more gloomily. The townsmen and the punchers were seeing, mentally, just five men who raced madly for the safety of the Malpedros and the lowering heights of the Windy Hills. But the bank's stockholders saw each of these grim, heavily-armed figures carrying around eight thousand dollars of bank-money.

THEY were considering ways and means of scratching up that sum, among themselves. And it was a hard year in the cow-country!

"Yeh—gone!" Al Jones nodded sourly. "I reckon you done about all we could expect o' any man, Shelley. They was just too slick—an' too lucky—for you. Too slick an' lucky for all o' us Pow Wow folks. Mebbe you'll run across 'em an' salivate 'em later. But they'll have the money spent by then."

Shelley stared gloomily down at the three dead men. Al Jones' absent words stung him. Pow Wow thought he had fallen down. They might soften their opinion a bit, in expressing it, but just the same, they figured that he had got his come-up-pance, this ride. He moved his big shoulders irritably.

"Well, let's tote them fellas uptown. Got to git back to the hawses. Ginger, I want to augur wi' yuh some, later."

He and Ginger Toolen and Dr. Pedersen, with Al Jones and the other two stockholders, brought up the procession's rear. And Shelley was moved to wonder why the robbers had not got out of the neighborhood when they had the chance to establish far more than an hour's start; why they had tried to attack the bank for the second time.

"Oh! I'm daft!" Pedersen cried and smacked his hand upon his thigh. "And, Al Jones, you're as daft as I! You can't be short more than a couple of thousands! Man, you can't be! For they didn't pick up the right sack, in the bank. They got to the old house and were going toward the horses in the brush, when Sonora noticed it. Then—"

"He sent Barney Choice to get the right sack!" Shelley snapped. "I been wonderin' what Barney Nitwit was doin' the'. An', Al, Barney never got a thing! I stepped in on him an' he never had a chance. So yo' money must be the', yet!"

"Only, it ain't!" Al Jones said flatly. "We checked up, hopin' ag'inst hope 't wasn't so bad as it must be. The's nigh onto forty thousand shy. Somebody got it!"

"Well, that gang didn't!" Dr. Pedersen said flatly. "I heard the conversation! And that was the reason they finally decided to take a chance, after dark, of striking the bank again. You see, they had a lovely hiding place in the tunnel."

"I do' no' what become o' the money. But the vault was open. Carteret was checkin' up. I was waitin' for Edders to come in an' talk about extendin' a big mortage I got on his Slash-E outfit. Then they come in through the side door. I opened when I heard Edders' voice. They tied me an' Edders up an' went on out into the bank. An' then—"

"Wait a minute!" said Shelley, quickly. "Edders was tied to the end o' the desk nearer the door than yuh was, Al. Oh, Edders! Lend us a hand, will yuh?"

Edders came back to them.

"I could see 'em once in a while, rammin' money into sacks," he scowled. "But—no, I never see 'em do anything *with* the sacks. They wasn't always in sight, ye see."

"Well," said Shelley thoughtfully, "in that case, d' yuh mind lettin' me take that sack o' tobacco bags yuh been packin' all afternoon, Edders? The sack that's makin' yuh look so pot-bellied? We got an idee, Edders, that yo' idees o' smokin' tobacco is right rich. To rich to pack out to the Slash-E for punchers' smokin'. . . ."

"Huh?" cried Edders—and the grunt was echoed by all those around.

SHELLEY had his hand out. His smile was very clear in the white moonlight.

"Yuh see, Edders," he drawled—taking a long shot, "I been sort o' wonderin' about yuh, quite a spell. But I just couldn't read yo' brand—quite. Till now. Yuh tolled us off on that trail o' yo' own boys—that was told to make that trail from the spot it started from.

"Then, when yuh see we was ready to come back to town an' git after yo' friends once more—in real earnest, yuh dropped yo' never-was-stole watch in the trail an' 'found' it right away. When that never worked, yuh made the best o' things an' come back with us, just whinin' to git at them robbers. Oh, yuh played her slick!

"An' me, askin' yuh once today what yuh was packin' in yo' shirt. An' yuh sayin' so calm an' easy 't was a lot o' Bull Durham yuh was packin' to the boys at the ranch! Hand it over, Edders. Yuh picked up the right sack when yuh come out into the bank an' Al, here, turned his back on yuh a minute."

He was a wolf, that black, nerveless little man. He was a gunman, too! He had stood coldly—surprised as he must have been—listening to Shelley. But now, he whipped a pistol from its holster and threw up at Shelley.

Shelley's hand dropped to Colt-butt with the speed that had made his name famous over much of Texas, for lightning gunplay.

The long Colt flipped over the holster top and down went the hammer—with a dull click. The gun that Ralls had had; still unloaded! Shelley flung it at Edders' face as the little man was letting go his hammer. Then he jerked his left-hand gun and shot Edders twice.

He stood looking down at him for an instant. Then he stooped.

"Yo, money, Al," he said quietly, straightening. "Got a li'l blood on it, mebbe. But most folks'll take it just as quick, yuh'll find."

An hour or more later, where he sat quietly with Ginger Toolen in the Metropolis Rooming House, he was found by a delegation of Pow Wow's prominent citizens. Al Jones was obviously the spokesman for this group. Shelley listened courteously and attentively to Al Jones, then blew a ring of smoke toward the dingy ceiling and shook his head.

"No," he said calmly, but very flatly. "No. I got not a thing ag'inst Pow Wow for a place in which to drive a nail an' hang my hat. I know that the job o' sher'fin' the county would be better pay than I'm collectin' as sergeant in the Rangers. But yuh'll have to find yuh another sher'f, Al. I can't take the job."

"If you hadn't got back the money, we wouldn't have ask' you to take it," Al Jones said half-angrily. "But you got it back! I mean, we wouldn't have ask' you, because we would've known you wanted to trail 'em an' git in a lick. But now, you can feel you're even with this Sonora Till, seems to me!"

"Even?" Shelley drawled, cocking a calm blue eye at the banker. "Yuh never see that note he took his pen in his paw an' wrote me. So yuh might say that. But I'm nowhere near even, Al. Nowhere!

"I'm headin' out tomorrow—Ginger Toolen an' me together, that is. I'm after Sonora Till. The detail won't be done till I meet him where he can't git away like he done tonight. The's somethin' about Rangerin' yuh seem to kind o' forgit, Al. When a Ranger starts after a man, he acts kind o' funny; he don't figger he's done his job till he gits his man. So, thankin' yuh all kindly, just the same, I can't take the job."

Al Jones scowled, then grinned.

"I was just thinkin' o' what the robbers yelled, when they heard you all ridin' up tonight—*Chigaroo!* 't was. So, if you feel the way you do, I think I'd say to Mr. Sonora Till:

"*Chigaroo!* Sonora! Ain't that somebody *behind* you?"

The End

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine, published Bi-Monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1938.

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Abraham Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York; Editor, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York; Managing Editor, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York; Business Manager, Abraham Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is..... (This information is required from daily publications only.)

ABRAHAM GOODMAN, Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23rd day of September, 1938. MAURICE COYNE.

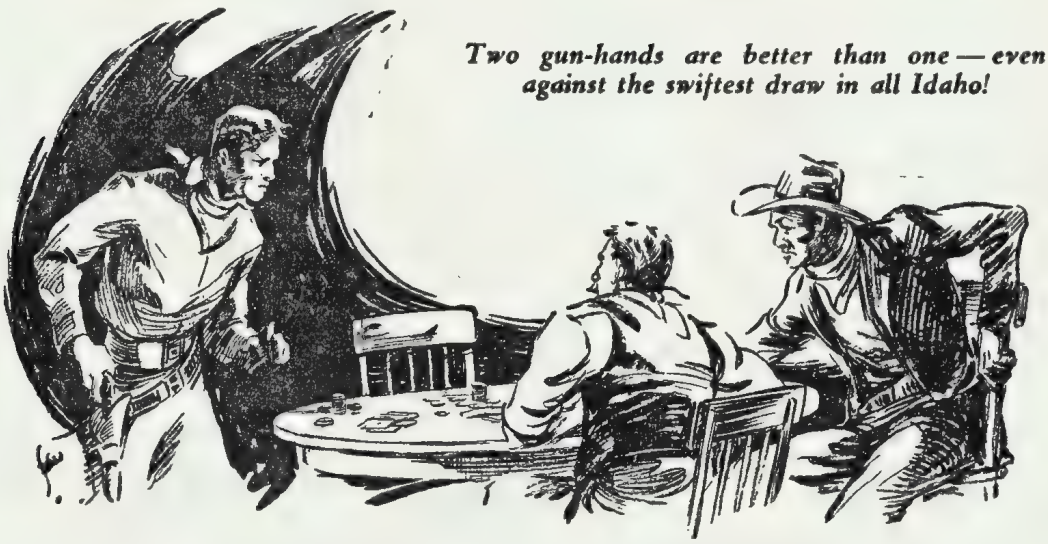
[SEAL] (My commission expires March 30, 1940.)

New York Co. Clerk No. 562.

Guns Up

By LARRY COLT

Author of "Town Full of Trouble," etc.



Two gun-hands are better than one — even against the swiftest draw in all Idaho!

"YO' damn cheat!" with this taunt the tall, brown youngster with the disorderly dark hair threw back his chair and rose to his feet angrily. His right hand went seeking the revolver at his hip.

But "Steel-Eye" Dervish, into whose teeth the accusing words had been flung, was the deadliest shot in all Idaho. Quickly though the raging youngster drew, the gun of Dervish spoke first.

No more than that one powder explosion broke the sudden stillness. The tall, brown youngster coughed and crumpled pathetically. The .38 bullet had gone through his heart.

"He would hev it!"

Grimly Steel-Eye Dervish shoved his smoking revolver back in its holster, turned on his heel, and walked out of the Chipmunk Bar.

No one moved to halt his progress. Indeed, no one spoke until the swinging doors had closed behind the killer's form. Then:

"Pore devil!" expressed Tom Dade, the prospector.

"Aw, he brung it on hisself!" declared one of the other two men who had been sitting at the poker table. "They was all his chips in the pot, and he got rattled 'cause Steel-Eye's four jacks raked her in!"

"It war fair and square gun-play," put in Abel Hanks, the bartender. "He drew fust, but Steel-Eye beat him to it!"

"Fair and square?" muttered Dade. "Why, he ain't more'n a boy, hardly. An' Steel-Eye, with a dozen notches on his gun—the best shot in the hull state!"

"Wall, whut yuh goin' tuh do about it?" asks Hanks. "Mebbe it war a leetle rough on the younker, but he should of kept his mouth shet!"

"Who is he, anyhow?" someone inquired. "Never seed him afore, that I recolleck."

"Name's Harland, I think," replied the bartender. "Him and his cousin worked a homestead back in the hills aways. Come out from Kaintucky, he tole me."

"We'd better tell his cousin about this then, I reckon," Tom Dade said. "He'll wanter look arter the pore devil."

The sympathetic prospector was in the Chipmunk Bar when the dead man's cousin and partner arrived. So was Pete Addison, the sheriff, an official with great respect for Steel-Eye Dervish's pistol prowess.

The other homesteader was likewise

tall and browned from Idaho's merciless suns, but appeared to be the elder by five or six years.

Whatever grief the sight of his slain cousin might have inspired in his heart was not discernible on his face, but Tom Dade did overhear him say:

"Po' Archie! He was jus lak a brotheh tuh me!"

A moment later he inquired, in a manner fairly calm, how it had happened.

"It was all in fair, square gun-play," stated Abel Hanks. "Four of 'em war playin' poker, and Steel-Eye laid down the hand that took a big pot. Yuhr cousin thar, real sudden-like, calls him a damn cheat and jumps up reachin' for his gun. Steel-Eye beat him tuh the draw."

"But it was just a youngster agin Dervish, a deadshot and a killer!" protested Dade.

THERE was an odd, faraway look in the dark eyes of Claude Harland.

"Archie wasn't a man to call anotheh a cheat unless he was cheatin'," he observed, at length. "Ah reckon this Misteh Dervish musta been triflin with them cya'ds."

"Yuhr cousin ain't the fust one tuh say somethin' like that to Steel-Eye Dervish," the bartender voiced. "But they's all war he is now. Nobody has ever called him a cheat a second time."

"I think it is high time a stop wuz put to Steel-Eye's gun-play!" Tom Dade turned hotly to the sheriff. "I reckon, Pete, yuh oughta be puttin' Dervish behind bars. He's killed enough men here in Nugget Float, and now this—"

"Abel says Harland drew fust, and thet it war a fair fight." Pete Addison shifted his bulk uneasily. 'Less thar's a complaint made I don't see why I should arrest Steel-Eye."

"Ah ain't askin' yo'all to arrest nobody, sheriff," said the dead man's partner, mildly. "Yo'all say it happened in faih fight. All right. Ah reckon Archie was jest a mite slow."

Abel Hanks set a bottle out on the bar.

"No use takin' on about it, Mr. Harland. And Steel-Eye never begun shootin' with any man until he started drawin'."

Claude Harland, however, refused the proffered drink.

"Some day, mebbe," he drawled, "Ah'll play cya'ds with Misteh Dervish. An' mebbe Ah'll find out whetheh or not he cheats."

His tone was even, low-pitched. Yet all who heard the words sensed something implacable, deadly, in them.

"I'm glad I'm not Steel-Eye Dervish!" Tom Dade declared later. "That feller is a Kaintuckian, and they mean bizness! Either he'll kill Steel-Eye, or Steel-Eye will kill him!"

"Wal, I'm puttin' my dust on Dervish," muttered Hanks. "If he fools with Steel-Eye thar'll be another job of buryin' around here, I reckon."

Tom Dade shook his head. Something in Claude Harland's manner had impressed him. He knew a little of men, and this young Kentuckian, for all his soft speaking, appealed to him as a foe not to be despised.

"I only hope I'm lucky enough to be on hand when the showdown comes!" he told himself.

Several weeks went by with no hostile gesture coming from the homesteader. Untroubled by Sheriff Pete Addison, Steel-Eye Dervish had returned to the card tables of the Chipmunk Bar night after night to shuffle the pasteboards with his lean fingers and sweep his fellow gamblers with the hard gray eyes which had earned him his sobriquet.

It was a fortnight after the funeral that Claude Harland next put in an appearance at the Chipmunk. As he stepped up to the bar and ordered

straight whiskey, Abel Hanks saw that his right hand was wrapped in bandages.

"Hev an accident?" the bartender queried.

"Mashed it a little the otheh day cuttin' some timbeh," responded the homesteader. "Reckon Ah'll have it tied up about a week or so."

Casually his eyes glanced over the card tables, finally focusing on Steel-Eye Dervish. With curiosity rather than vindictiveness he seemed to study the slayer of his cousin.

"Wanter take hand in a game?" asked Hanks with a touch of malice. A cow-puncher had just risen from the Dervish table.

"No, not tonight," quietly answered the homesteader. He tossed down his drink, and departed from the saloon. Steel-Eye had not even seen him.

THE following night, however, as he came in for a glass of liquor, someone whispered to Dervish, and the killer regarded the Kentuckian with a slight sneer.

Under the calm return gaze of Claude Harland, strangely enough, the hard eyes of Steel-Eye dropped. He went back to his cards rather serious of mien.

The homesteader drained his glass and again departed quietly.

For four nights he continued to do this, always coming in for one drink and a calm scrutiny of the table at which Dervish sat, and then making an unobtrusive exit. His right hand was still in bandages, and bystanders noted he used the left very awkwardly in drinking his liquor.

On the fifth night, though, Claude Harland did not leave after his solitary glass. Instead, he observed carelessly:

"Ah feel lucky tonight, somehow. Reckon Ah'll play some cya'ds."

"Sure!" said Abel Hanks, but his brow wrinkled. It wrinkled further when he saw that the homesteader waited until he got a seat at the table of Steel-Eye Dervish, directly across from the gunman supreme.

Tom Dade, the prospector, saw this, too. He dropped out of the faro game to take a place at the bar. He sensed something worth watching was likely to occur.

However, the game progressed peacefully, hand after hand. Though Steel-Eye had recognized the homesteader immediately, his features registered nothing but indifference at Harland's entry into the game. All he had said was:

"Can yuh deal 'em with thet hand tied up thataway?"

"Yessuh, it's most well," replied the homesteader. "Ah can wriggle the fingehs enough to flip cya'ds or pull a triggeh, suh."

"Indeed?" Dervish said no more, but his cold eyes narrowed.

Claude Harland was able to deal the cards when his turn came, albeit a trifle clumsily.

At the end of an hour's play, during which he had won considerable chips, the Kentuckian opened strongly. His right hand neighbor and Dervish were the only one to stay. The latter raised heavily, and Harland met it. The third man dropped out.

"One cya'd," voiced the homesteader.

Dervish flipped the pasteboard to him, and tossed two of his own cards away. As his lean fingers slipped into the pack for his needed twain, Harland suddenly spoke.

"By God, Archie was right!" he said. "Ah saw it that time, Dervish. Yo'all are a damn, sneakin' cheatin' gambleh!"

The slayer of this man's cousin under similar circumstances did not change color. But his chilly eyes grew deadly, fastened unwaveringly upon the homesteader's bandaged right hand.

"Crippled or not, yuh can't live arter that!"

Slowly his hand went toward his hip.

"Neveh mind my bein' crippled!" Harland hurled back his chair with the left hand. "Ahm goin' tuh kill yo'all, Mistah Dervish!"

"Draw, damn yuh!" grated the deadliest shot in all Idaho.

Tom Dade started forward from the bar, clawing for his own sixshooter.

"It's plain murder!" he protested.

None gave him heed. Everyone in the saloon was scattering for safety.

Steel-Eye Dervish never removed his steely eyes from that bandaged hand. He watched it plunge toward the Colt at Harland's hip, timing its motion with a sort of cruel anticipation. He didn't even hear a startled exclamation which escaped Abel Hank, his friend, the bartender.

Ah! Now the fool had his crippled hand on the gun! Well, he would have it! Bandaged or unbandaged, whose hand in Idaho was quicker on the draw than that of Steel-Eye Dervish?

With that speed and sureness which had won him his repute and sent a dozen men to death, Steel-Eye reached and drew.

TWO guns barked almost simultaneously. But not quite. And just that second of difference spelled death for one of the duelists.

The amazed, unbelieving onlookers saw Steel-Eye Dervish, his temple shattered, writhing his last on the dirty floor. His own lead had lodged in the rafters, and Claude Harland stood untouched.

Not for several seconds did anyone but Abel Hanks realize that the gun which had ended a killer's career hung

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from the *left hand* of the homesteader. Only the bartender had seen that other hand plunge into his shirt front as Harland's bandaged right went toward the hip holster.

Steel-Eye Dervish had timed the wrong hand!

"Ah'm nachelly lefthanded," admitted the Kentuckian, "and Ah reckon Misteh Dervish didn't know it. Othehwise I'd be wheah he and po' Archie is now."

"The bandage fooled him!" jubilantly expressed Tom Dade. "This fair and square gunfighter was goin' to shoot a cripple, he thought. But yuh tricked him, Harland!"

"Ah knowed if they was shootin' he was apt to be quicker on the draw than me. Ah decided to attract his attention to the hand most folks use. It ain't neveh been hurt, but a bandage makes it stick out. Of co'se, Ah carried two guns, and havin' advehtised my bandaged hand fo' sev'al nights, Ah decided to sit in a game and see if he really cheated."

"The evidence shows he musta," remarked Abel Hanks, who now that the king was dead, was willing to say long live the king. "I didn't think Steel-Eye would try to shoot a cripple, nohow, and it serves him right."

"With that I agree, and I reckon we all do," added Tom Dade. "Harland, you've done this community of Nugget Float a service. Steel-Eye was a killer, and all killers comes to the same end."

"Ah'm sorry it had to be done, but he was a cya'd cheat, and he shot po' Archie." The Kentuckian's voice shook just a trifle, for the first time since any of them had known him. "That boy was mo' than a cousin to me. He was jus' lak a brotheh."

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